



EMBASSY OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

INFORMATION RESOURCE CENTER



Thanksgiving Is a Time for Tradition and Sharing



Marshmallow, the National Thanksgiving Turkey pardoned by president Bush, acts as the grand marshal of the 2005 Thanksgiving parade at Disneyland in Anaheim, California. (© AP Images)

Thanksgiving in the United States is possibly the premier U.S. family celebration, typically celebrated at home and marked with a substantial feast. As the anchor of what is for many a four-day holiday weekend, Thanksgiving provides an occasion for family reunions, marks the beginning of the “holiday season” that continues through Christmas and New Year’s Day and, as its name suggests, affords Americans a shared opportunity to express their gratitude for plentiful food and general abundance.

Many cultures traditionally have marked a plentiful harvest with a celebration of thanks. Long before the first English settlers reached North America, Western Europeans observed “Harvest Home” festivals and the British an August 1 Lammas (“Loaf Mass”) Day, celebrating the wheat harvest. The American Thanksgiving holiday began in 1621 with the first successful Pilgrim harvest, one that truly provided an occasion to give thanks.

The Pilgrims had arrived in 1620, crossing the Atlantic Ocean to separate themselves from the official Church of England and practice freely their form of Puritanism. Arriving at Plymouth Colony—part of today’s Massachusetts—too late to grow many crops, and lacking fresh food, the Pilgrims suffered terribly during the winter of 1620–1621. Half the colony died from disease. The following spring, local Wampanoag Indians taught the colonists how to grow corn (maize) and other local crops unfamiliar to the Pilgrims, and also helped the newcomers master hunting and fishing.

Because they harvested bountiful crops of corn, barley, beans and pumpkins, the colonists had much to be thankful for in the fall of 1621. English Puritans had traditionally designated special days of thanksgiving to express gratitude for God’s blessings. In the autumn of 1621, the Pilgrims of Plymouth Colony held their first Thanksgiving. They invited their Wampanoag benefactors who arrived with deer to roast with the turkeys and other wild game offered by the colonists. The colonists had learned how to cook cranberries and different kinds of corn and squash dishes from the Indians.

Many of the original colonists continued to celebrate days of thanksgiving for a bountiful autumn harvest. President George Washington proclaimed a national Thanksgiving in 1789, to celebrate the ratification of the United States Constitution. Gradually, a number of states began to celebrate an annual Thanksgiving. In 1863, during the long and bloody civil war, President Abraham Lincoln proclaimed the last Thursday in November an annual national Thanksgiving.

Thanksgiving is a time for tradition and sharing. Even if they live far away, family members often gather for family reunions. As a result, Thanksgiving marks the busiest domestic air travel period of the year. Many Americans enjoy a local Thanksgiving parade, or the annual Macy’s department store parade, televised live from New York City. Others watch televised American football, while all give thanks together for their food, shelter and other good things. Many volunteer their time to help civic groups, churches, and charitable organizations offer traditional meals to those in need.



Rocky and Bullwinkle floats soar over Broadway during the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade in New York. (© AP Images)

On a more secular note, the day after Thanksgiving came in the 20th century to mark the beginning of the Christmas shopping season. During the Great Depression of the 1930s, Thanksgiving was moved to the fourth Thursday in November, which in some years lengthened that shopping period.

Although the fourth Thursday of November falls on a different date every year, the president is expected to proclaim that date as the official celebration.

SYMBOLS OF THANKSGIVING

Turkey, corn (maize), pumpkins and cranberry sauce are symbols that represent the first Thanksgiving. These symbols often are depicted on holiday decorations and greeting cards. Corn in particular is held to represent the survival of the Pilgrim colonies. Used as a table or door decoration, corn or maize represents the harvest and the fall season.

Sweet-sour cranberry sauce, or cranberry jelly, was on the first Thanksgiving table and is still served today. The cranberry is a small, sour berry. It grows in bogs, or muddy areas, in Massachusetts and other New England states. The Indians used the fruit to treat infections and the juice to dye their rugs and blankets. They taught the colonists how to cook the berries with sweetener and water to make a sauce. The Indians called it "ibimi," which means "bitter berry." The Pilgrims preferred "crane-berry" because the flowers of the berry bent the stalk over, reminding them of the long-necked crane. The berries are still grown in New England.

In 1988, a Thanksgiving night ceremony of a different kind took place at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City. Among the more than four thousand people gathered there were Native Americans representing tribes from all over the country and descendants of the later immigrants. The ceremony acknowledged publicly the Native American role in the first American Thanksgiving, a feast held to thank the Indians for sharing the knowledge and skill without the first Pilgrims would not have survived.

Thanksgiving Fare: Let's Talk Turkey

Picture the traditional Thanksgiving dinner: a festive table, a loving family, glowing candles and the finest china used only on special occasions. And the centerpiece of the festive meal: the turkey, golden brown, with stuffing and gravy on the side, awaiting the carving knife and whetting the appetites of all those present. This scene, however, is not from history, but it emerges from a desire to remake history into our own vision.

No Thanksgiving Turkey?

Wild turkeys, as they would have been encountered in New England nearly four centuries ago certainly did not resemble the overstuffed fowl, cultivated for our dinner table, that we have come to recognize, even by silhouette. Tough, resourceful, able to fly and hard to catch, turkeys were not the first choice of either Native Americans or early colonial hunters. This creature was so tenacious that none other than Benjamin Franklin suggested it be revered as our national symbol. Of course, the Bald Eagle ultimately won the honor by a feather.



So if turkey was not the main course at the first harvest festival, which we have adopted through time, as the model for Thanksgiving Dinner, then what was served?

Then What's for Thanksgiving Dinner?

The answer lies in some of the documents of the time. Edward Winslow's account details that "they went out and killed five deer" and mentions that "our governor sent four men on fowling" and that "they four, in one day, killed as much fowl as, with a little help beside, served the company almost a week." While it is possible that turkeys may have been killed, it is more likely that ducks or geese were the primary targets.

In addition, the crops grown by both settler and Native American would have graced that early thanksgiving dinner. Corn, squash, potatoes, yams, even wheat to make bread were, in all probability, shared and enjoyed. Ironically, however, it is not likely that cranberries were evident. Since they grew in bogs and were often inaccessible, gathering them may have been more effort than it was worth. In an even greater piece of irony, New England has become one of the principal locations for commercial farming of this tart, tough-skinned fruit.



Today there is such a large variety of food to choose from that a Thanksgiving Dinner can feature almost any main course. True, the traditional turkey is still the meat of choice, yet goose, duck, ham, even some of the sea's harvests can be used. In place of sweet potatoes, peas, rice dishes, greens, and even more exotic vegetables all make their way to this celebration of Thanksgiving and harvest.

The key to a Thanksgiving menu is to choose foods that will represent the idea of giving thanks for a good year, a harvesting of good fortune, and the sharing of the bounty of your efforts with friends and family. In today's world, the only limit on preparing a Thanksgiving Dinner is an individual's imagination and creativity.

Talkin' turkey FAQ

(CBS News Online)

Where do turkeys come from?

Turkey is a variety of pheasant. Archaeological evidence suggests turkeys roamed North America as far back as 10 million years ago. Native Americans domesticated them about 2,000 years ago.



Stars, a white-feathered turkey, was granted the traditional Thanksgiving season pardon by President Bush, Nov. 24, 2003. (AP Photo/J. Scott Applewhite)

Wild turkeys are found in hardwood forests with grassy areas and spend the night in trees. They have excellent vision and hearing. Their field of vision is 270 degrees. They can fly short distances at up to 90 km/h and can run at speeds up to 40 km/h. Turkeys do not see well at night.

Domesticated turkeys do not fly, due to selective breeding.

A male turkey is called a "tom" and a female turkey a "hen." A large group of turkeys is called a "flock."

Why are they called turkeys?

There are several theories:

- The Native American name for turkey is "firkee."
- The wild turkey's call sounds like "turk-turk-turk."
- Christopher Columbus named them "turka," which is a peacock in the Tamil language of India. Columbus thought the New World was connected to India.

Why do turkeys gobble?

Male turkeys gobble, hens do a clicking sound. The gobble is a seasonal call for the males. They also gobble when they hear loud noises and when they settle in for the night.



What are those fleshy things on turkey heads?

The long, red, fleshy area that grows from the forehead over the bill is a "snood," while the fleshy growth under the turkey's throat is called a "wattle." These pieces fill up with blood and turn bright red when a tom wants to attract a hen but they can also turn blue if the turkey is scared. If a turkey isn't feeling well, the snood and wattle become very pale.

Are there different breeds?

Common domesticated breeds include: Bronze, Broad Breasted Bronze, Broad Breasted Large White, Black, Bourbon Red, White Holland, Narragansett, and Beltsville Small White.

How did turkey become the bird of choice for holidays?

A type of harvest festival had been celebrated for many years in England and roast goose was part of the offerings. When pilgrims came to the New World, they carried on that tradition but there weren't many geese. Since there were lots of wild turkeys, they roasted the turkeys instead. Turkeys started to become more popular in the Old World after the publication, in 1843, of Charles Dickens' A Christmas Carol. Ebenezer Scrooge bought a large turkey for Christmas dinner after seeing the error of his ways.

How many are eaten??

The top turkey-eating country in the world is Israel at 13.2 kg/per person (pp) every year. Here's how other countries measure up:

- United States: 8 kg/pp
- France: 6.6 kg/pp
- Italy: 5.6 kg/pp
- Germany: 5 kg/pp
- United Kingdom: 4.2 kg/pp

Why do I feel sleepy after eating turkey?

Turkey contains an amino acid called L-Tryptophan. It's thought to be a natural sleep aid and helps produce serotonin, which has a tranquilizing effect. Starchy foods, such as potatoes, contain L-Tryptophan.

What's the nutrient content?

Nutrient	Dark meat (raw, skinless, boneless)(meat from turkey thigh and drum-stick) Per 100 gram serving	White meat (raw, skinless, boneless)(meat from turkey breast) Per 100 gram serving
Calories	105	103
Fat	2.73 g	0.82 g
Cholesterol	61 mg	50 mg
Protein	19.1 g	23.4 g

What's with the cranberry sauce and stuffing?

It's believed Native Americans taught the colonists how to cook cranberries and different kinds of corn, squash and pumpkin dishes. That's why the traditional turkey meal includes cranberries.

The origins of stuffing are not certain. Some experts say it's a traditional dish made from bread and vegetables and most probably originated in Eastern Europe. The pilgrims likely transplanted this from the Old World.

Thanksgiving Day Traditions

In the United States, aside from the Thanksgiving meal, we have come to celebrate Thanksgiving Day with parades, football, and the start of the Christmas shopping season.

Parades

Thanksgiving Day Parades, though not specifically documented, probably got their start when President Lincoln proclaimed an official day of Thanksgiving. Given the Union achievements of the summer of 1863, it would have been logical that any official event declared by the President would have been accompanied by a show of military strength and discipline such as a full-dress parade. Elaborate floats, musical shows and entertainment celebrities have replaced the parades of armed and uniformed men marching in cadence or to a military band, but the desired effect, to lift the spirits of the spectators, remains the goal.

Heralding the Christmas Rush

The day after Thanksgiving, often an additional day off has become "Black Friday" the day when the Christmas shopping frenzy first starts. Like football, this has become a cultural symbol of the holiday and the season.

Football

The advent of Thanksgiving Day football is purely a twentieth century invention. For years, the principal game was a tradition between the Detroit Lions and the Green Bay Packers. Yet, as this modern day ritual became more and more popular, more games were added with more teams.



Entertaining at Thanksgiving

Tradition doesn't mean that every Thanksgiving has to be the same as the last. Enlighten and excite everyone around you by trying something different this year.

Useful links – Teacher Resources

The "First" Thanksgiving

<http://members.aol.com/calebj/thanksgiving.html>

Mayflower History

<http://www.mayflowerhistory.com/>

The History of Thanksgiving

<http://www.history.com/minisites/thanksgiving/>

Plymouth Colony Archive Project

<http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/users/deetz/>

Plymouth, MA - It's History and People

<http://pilgrims.net/plymouth/history/index.htm>

Thanksgiving in American Memory

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/ndlpedu/features/thanks/thanks.html>

Thanksgiving. Pilgrims in American Culture

<http://www.plimoth.org/visit/what/index.asp>

Guess Who's Coming to Dinner. Creating a Multicultural Thanksgiving Celebration.

<http://www.nytimes.com/learning/teachers/lessons/20021127wednesday.html>

Mayflower. Lesson Plan

http://www.eduref.org/cgi-bin/printlessons.cgi/Virtual/Lessons/Social_Studies/US_History/USH0043.html

Plimoth Plantation: Just for Teachers

<http://www.plimoth.org/learn/education/teachers/index.asp>

Teaching About Thanksgiving

<http://www.cwis.org/fwdp/Americas/tchthnks.txt>

Teaching Colonial American History on the Web

<http://mcel.pacificu.edu/JAHC/JAHCIII1/K12/index.html>

Thanksgiving

<http://www.2020tech.com/thanks/temp.html>

Thanksgiving. Lesson Plan

http://www.eduref.org/cgi-bin/printlessons.cgi/Virtual/Lessons/Social_Studies/US_History/USH0200.html

Thanksgiving. Lesson Plans

<http://www.educationworld.com/holidays/archives/thanksgiving.shtml>