

Republican Perspective
21 November 2018
by Ed Manning

GIVING THANKS

“There is one day that is ours. Thanksgiving Day is the one day that is purely American.”

O. Henry - American author

Thanksgiving Day is tomorrow. To many Americans it is a time for turkey with all the trimmings. A time for football, pumpkin pie and family conversation. Far removed will be discussions of the Pilgrims of 1621 or the Civil War in 1863.

In November of 1620 the Pilgrims disembarked at Plymouth Rock to brave a New England winter. Unprepared for the brutal cold, nearly half of them died before Spring. As the weather thawed, they were surprised when an Indian named Samoset greeted them in their own language. He said that he was taught English from fishermen and traders.

Samoset returned with a friend named Squanto. Both of these Indians taught the Pilgrims much about how to live and survive in New England. While Samoset left for his tribe, Squanto remained to live with the Pilgrims and accepted their Christian faith. Pilgrim Governor William Bradford described Squanto as “a special instrument sent of God for our good . . . and never left us till he died.” Both Samoset and Squanto helped the Pilgrims forge a long-lasting peace treaty with the Wampanoag Indians.

In the summer of 1621 the Pilgrims reaped a bountiful harvest with the help of the Wampanoag. To celebrate their good fortune and to give thanks to God, the Pilgrims declared a three day feast to be held with the Indians in December — America’s first Thanksgiving. Fifty Pilgrims and ninety Wampanoag enjoyed the festivity. Historical documents show they feasted upon shellfish, lobsters, turkey, corn bread, berries, and deer. The young Pilgrim and Wampanoag men engaged in races, wrestling matches, athletic events and of prayer.

1623 was not kind to the Pilgrims as they experienced an extended and prolonged drought. Governor Bradford called them to a time of prayer and fasting to seek God’s intervention. Fortunately, their prayers were answered with a series of steady rainfall. The drought ended and the Fall produced another bountiful harvest and another thanksgiving.

The Pilgrim practice of designating an official time of the year for Thanksgiving spread to neighboring colonies. The New England Colonies developed a practice of calling for a day of prayer and fasting in the Spring, and a day of prayer and thanksgiving in the Fall.

In 1789 Americans celebrated our first national Thanksgiving. occurred with the commencement of the federal government. After framing the Bill of Rights, Congress adopted the following resolution:

Resolved, That a joint committee of both Houses be directed to wait upon the President of the United States to request that he would recommend to the people of the United States a Day of Public Thanksgiving and Prayer. . . .

President George Washington concurred with the request and issued the first federal Thanksgiving proclamation, declaring in part:

Whereas it is the duty of all nations to acknowledge the providence of Almighty God, to obey His will, to be grateful for His benefits, and humbly to implore His protection and favor. . . . Now, therefore, I do recommend and assign Thursday, the 26th day of November [1789] . . . that we may all unite to render unto Him our sincere and humble thanks for His kind care and protection.

For two decades, Mrs. Sarah Josepha Hale, promoted to president after president the idea of a national Thanksgiving Day. Abraham Lincoln agreed and set aside the last Thursday of November, 1863. Two months earlier, the Battle of Gettysburg raged in eastern Pennsylvania killing 60,000 Americans. Lincoln's Thanksgiving proclamation was remarkable for its tone of positive optimism in the midst of the darkest days of the Civil War.

Presidents followed Lincoln's precedent for over seventy-five years. Each declared a national Thanksgiving Day but the date varied from proclamation to proclamation. This changed in 1933. Franklin D. Roosevelt began celebrating Thanksgiving on the fourth Thursday of each November. In 1941, Congress permanently established that day as the national Thanksgiving holiday.

We have much to be thankful for as 2018 winds to a close. We live in a most prosperous and generous nation. Give thought to George Washington's 1789 words. Enjoy the day.

You may wish to share this column with your grandchildren. The revisionist history taught today has no bounds. It's important that future generations understand our Thanksgiving heritage.