

#372 Superintendent Blog: “A Brief History of Thanksgiving”

Thursday we will celebrate one of the great American traditions in Thanksgiving. This day was a long time in the making to what it is and means to us today. Throughout history a day of celebration was observed in many cultures and countries following fall harvests as people gave thanks for their food and the ability to make it through another impending winter. Over time these celebrations became more coordinated and associated with tradition. The first Thanksgiving in America (although it wasn't called that) was in 1565 when 600 Spanish settlers held a Mass of Thanks for their safe delivery to the new world.

We are most familiar with the Thanksgiving tradition that began with the English settlers at the Virginia Colony and the Pilgrims at Plymouth who came together to celebrate their harvest and good fortune of having made it through a very difficult drought, and rounds of sickness that had claimed the lives of many settlers. For next century Thanksgiving was held sporadically in various villages & cities that dotted the colonies.

Following the Revolutionary War and our nation's Independence, President George Washington made a Presidential decree in 1789 declaring our first National day of Thanksgiving. President Washington again proclaimed a Thanksgiving Day in 1795 but it was still not a national holiday. President John Adams declared Thanksgivings in 1798 & 1799 but after that they were again only celebrated sporadically across our young nation. In 1814 President John Madison declared a day of Thanksgiving at the end of the War of 1812.

Over the next 50 years a day of Thanksgiving went back to being a local or sometimes state holiday held at different times of the year but most often in the fall surrounding harvest. In the early 1860's America once again found itself facing difficult times with the unprecedented suffering brought to people by the Civil War. In the dark days of this conflict 1863, when the future of a United States was in doubt, President Lincoln proclaimed a “national Thanksgiving Day be celebrated on the final Thursday in November.” Our Nation has held an official “National Day of Thanksgiving” ever since.

In 1939 when America was still in the grips of the “Great Depression” President Roosevelt changed the official observance to the 2nd to the last Thursday in November to extend the holiday shopping season and help stimulate what was left of our shattered economy. In 1941 as America

was being pulled into WWII, Congress split the difference and passed a bill requiring that Thanksgiving be observed annually on the fourth Thursday of November where it remains today.

As you can see, a common theme throughout our nation's history is setting aside a time, often after a difficult period, in which to give thanks, take stock of what we have and to give back to those who are less fortunate. All of us in this district, community, state and nation have much to be thankful for. I hope you get some time over this holiday to reflect on some of the things in your life you are grateful for and give thanks. Have a safe and blessed Thanksgiving!

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