

UNITED STATES
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
WASHINGTON

ADDRESS ONLY
THE DIRECTOR, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

December 8, 1939.

Memorandum for Mr. Ben Thompson:

In accordance with your telephonic request of December 5, the following report on the first Thanksgiving Day in the United States is submitted:

That the Pilgrims at Plymouth had a Thanksgiving festival in the fall of 1621 and that it set a precedent for Thanksgiving as a national institution are established facts. However, to identify the exact site and date of that first Thanksgiving from available evidence seems impossible. William Bradford and Edward Winslow, prominent figures at that affair, both give accounts of it. Neither, though, is specific as to the exact scene or date of the activities. The official records of the colony contain no reference to the occasion, nor do the church records for the same period.¹

From research, however, it can safely be assumed:

1. That the Pilgrim Thanksgiving was between September 23 and November 9, 1621. Probably it was late in October.²
2. That most of the attendant festivities took place on or near the top of the hill at the end of Leyden Street (then the only street) in the place that came to be known as Town Square.³

1. Russell, W.S.: Pilgrim Memorials and Guide to Plymouth, 126-127.
The records were checked by the writer.
2. Palfrey, J.G.: History of New England, I, 186-187;
On Sept. 23 an exploring party returned from Boston Bay, then the harvest was gathered, after which came the Thanksgiving fete. The next date is No. 9, when the Fortune arrived. E. Winslow, "A Letter Sent From New England, et." in The Story of The Pilgrim Fathers, 1606-1623 A.D. (Edward Arber, Editor), 488-489.
3. Leyden Street, first street laid out, originally extended from the water to the top of Burial Hill. At the head of the street, on the brow of Burial Hill, was the fort erected as a defence against the Indians and also as a place of public worship. The upper portion of the street is now called Town Square. Glimpses of Pilgrim Plymouth: The Albertype Co., N.Y., (Copyright, 1888, By A.S. Burbank, Plymouth)

The site referred to was important in the public lives of the Puritans, especially because the lower half of the fort on the hill was the meeting-house, although not in use as such until after 1622. Before that time "History affords nothing definite respecting a place of public worship,....., though from incidental hints it may be inferred that the common house was used for that purpose."¹ This common house, the first structure erected in Plymouth, was about twenty feet square and located near the declivity of the hill towards the water side.²

About 140 people, including 90 Indians, participated in the celebration. W. De Loss Love, author of The Fast and Thanksgiving Days of New England, published in 1895, says that the colonists divided into households according to convenience and "over each some Pilgrim mother presided who was thoroughly skilled in the art of cookery". According to that statement, feasting was not always around a central banquet table, but rather sub-divided throughout the town.

Edward Winslow's first hand account, often quoted in secondary works, follows:

"Our corn did prove well, and God be praised! we had a good increase of Indian corn... Our harvest being gotten in, our Governor sent four men on fowling, that so we might, after a more special matter, rejoice together, after we had gathered the fruit of our labors (what, in England, would be called a Harvest Festival. It was the first New England Thanksgiving Day). They four, in one day, killed as much fowl, as, with a little help besides, served the company (about fifty English people left alive) almost a week. At which time, amongst other recreations, we exercised our Arms; many of the Indians coming amongst us.

"And, amongst the rest, their greatest King Massasoit, with some ninety men; whom, for three days, we entertained and feasted. And they went out and killed five deer; which they brought to the Plantation, and bestowed on our governor, and upon the Captain and others." ³

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1. Russell, W.S. Pilgrim Memorials, 60
 2. Ibid.,55
 3. Winslow in Arber, The Story of the Pilgrim Fathers, 488-489

After 1621 the Pilgrims observed Thanksgiving with no regularity, giving thanks whenever the occasion demanded it. As a matter of fact they started giving thanks in America upon landing in 1620. "Being thus arrived in a good harbor and brought safe to land, they fell upon their knees and blessed y God of heaven, who had brought them from all y periles and miseries therof, againe to set their feete on y firme and stable earth, their proper elemente!"¹

In July, 1623, when after six weeks' drought, prayers for rain brought immediate and satisfactory results, "another Solemn Day was set apart and appointed for that end: wherein we returned glory, honours, and praise, with all thankfulness to our good God, which dealt so graciously with us."² On October 28, 1668 there was a court proposition to set aside November 25 as a solemn day of Thanksgiving. In 1680 the date was set as October 20; in 1690, November 26.³ "For more than eithgy years after the Pilgrims landed . . . , it (Thanksgiving) was more or less miscellaneous in its order, in its times, and in its character."⁴

The following paragraph from the Encyclopedia Britannica is a brief history of Thanksgiving Day to the present:

The Pilgrims set apart a day for Thanksgiving. . . . immediately after their first harvest in 1621; the Massachusetts Bay Colony for the first time in 1630, and frequently thereafter until about 1680, when it became an annual festival in that colony; and Connecticut as early as 1639 and annually after 1647, except in 1675. The Dutch in New Netherland appointed a day for thanksgiving in 1644 and occasionally thereafter. During the Revolutionary War the Continental Congress appointed one or more thanksgiving (Thurs., Nov. 26) in 1789, and .. another in 1795. Pres. Madison, , set apart a day for thanksgiving at the close of the War of 1812. By 1858 proclamations appointing a day of thanksgiving were issued by the governors of 25 states and 2 territories. Pres. Lincoln appointed the last Thursday of Nov., 1864 and each president has followed his example (that is, up to 1939 when President Roosevelt proclaimed the third Thursday, Nov. 23, Thanksgiving Day).

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1. Bradford, Wm: History of the Plymouth Plantation, 78
 2. Winslow, "Good News from New England" in Arber, The Story of the Pilgrim Fathers, 578-579;
Prince, Thomas; A Chronological History of New England, III, 78
 3. I.N. Tarbox, "Thanksgiving in History" in New Englander, XXXVIII, 244
 4. Ibid, . 252

Alvin P. Stauffer

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Branch of Historic Sites.

Primary

Arber, Edward, Editor: The Story of the Pilgrim Fathers, 1606-1623, A.D. London, 1897, Source material from Bradford's Journal; Edward Winslow, "A Letter Sent From New England to A Friend In These Parks Setting Forth A Brief And True Declaration of The Worth of That Plantation....." and "Good News From New England"; Mourt's Relation.

Bradford, William: History of the Plymouth Plantation

Prince, Thomas: A Chronological History of New England, III, (Boston, N.E. 1736) Contains much same material as Arber (see above).

Secondary

Barry, John S. : The History of Massachusetts, The Colonial Period, (Boston 1855).

Love, W. De Loss, Ph.D.: The Fast and Thanksgiving Days of New England: Houghton, Mifflin & Co., Boston and New York, 1895.

Palfrey, J. G.: History of New England I: (Boston, 1858)

Russell, W.S. : Pilgrim Memorials and Guide to Plymouth With Lithographic Map, and Eight Copperplate Engravings: Crosby, Nichols, Lee & Co., Boston, 1860.

Glimpses of Plymouth (Guide book): The Albertype Co., N.Y. (Copyright, 1888, by A. S. Burbank)

Colby, F. M., "Thanksgiving in History" in Potter's American Monthly, XV. (Nov. 1880); 345

Tarbox, I.N.: "Our New England Thanksgiving" in New Englander, XXXVIII, (Mar., 1879): 240

historical & commemorating (at far) however
 Indians (if your region) the idea is a good one if you can find
 the spot without another Wakefield fight. E.M.

Ma 55

~~Ben:~~

File 12/12/39

(or was!)

Thanksgiving is a day more than a place. I think we would find ourselves groping for a program for such a monument in the eleven months outside of November.

However, there should be a monument in Plymouth for other reasons - general historical & commemorative

Indians (if your version the idea is a good one if you can find the spot without another Wakefield fight. E.M.

Mr. Jager
File
Suggest we file for possible later consideration in connection with Plymouth
(B.K.)

035
Thanksgiving

DATE _____

A.M. _____

most popular, purely American that it may require, at least explore the possibilities or near the site of the first battle its original scene.

Ben N. Thompson
(at far) however

Ma 55

all of the historical, cultural, traditional and literary associations of the Pilgrims. Dr. Bumpus is much interested in something there but has never crystallized his thoughts into a specific project. A study of the possibilities is needed.

R.T. Lee

Mr. Jager ^{WUM}
File
Suggest we file for possible later consideration in connection with Plymouth.

(B/K)

035
Thanksgiving

DATE _____

1 A.M.

most popular, purely American that it may require, at least we explore the possibilities or near the site of the first possible its original scene.

Ben N. Thompson
(not far) however

at Indians (if your version the idea is a good one if you can find the spot without another Wakefield fight. L.M.