



# Knapp Notes

MONTGOMERY TOWNSHIP HISTORICAL SOCIETY

## THANKSGIVING FACTS & FANTASY

Every holiday has its origin story. We credit the Romans for Valentine's Day, the Celts for Halloween, and Congress for declaring July 4th a national holiday (not until 1870, mind you.) Every American school child learns how the grateful Pilgrims invited their Indians neighbors to a harvest feast, and Thanksgiving was born. The story is certainly based on fact, but, as so often happens when historical narratives are retold and embellished over generations, our version of Thanksgiving has strayed a little from the original.

Our national feast day does harken back to a three-day harvest celebration held in 1621 at "Plimouth" Plantation, the first permanent English settlement north of Virginia. However, there are records of earlier thanksgiving celebrations in new world colonies, including one in 1565 in St. Augustine, Florida when the Spanish explorer Pedro Menéndez de Avilé held a mass to thank God for his crew's safe arrival, then invited members of the local Timucua tribe to dinner. Then, in 1619, two years before the New England colony's celebrated feast, 38 British settlers who reached a site known as Berkeley Hundred on the banks of Virginia's James River, read a proclamation designating the date as "a



day of thanksgiving to Almighty God."

There is no record of what was actually served at the Plymouth Thanksgiving dinner. Pilgrim chronicler Edward Winslow wrote that Governor Bradford sent four men on a "fowling" mission to prepare for the event, and since wild turkeys were plentiful in New England forests, we can speculate that turkey was probably on the menu. Fish and lobster are also possibilities, and perhaps even seal meat. According to Winslow, the Wampanoag Indian guests arrived bearing five deer. No doubt, all the food was prepared over an open fire, and since the Pilgrims had no oven and their precious supply of sugar was running low, there were probably no desserts or pies. Pumpkin, if available, would have been stewed and served as a side dish.

For the next two centuries, days of thanksgiving were often celebrated by individual colonies and states. New Englanders



**Mission Accomplished**

This past summer, with the interior restoration of the Knapp farmhouse mostly complete, MTHS board members turned their attention to outside improvements. The most pressing need was to remove the deteriorated beams and siding from the former barn. In July, contractors were hired clear the area. The barn's concrete floor and cow stalls were retained and will be used to help interpret some of the daily activities of a working farm.



**Annual  
Holiday Open House  
at Knapp Farm**

**Sunday, December 10  
1:00-4:00 pm  
All Welcome!**

continued the tradition of the Plymouth Thanksgiving, while Pennsylvanians preferred the traditional English Harvest Home festival. During the American Revolution, the Continental Congress designated one or more days of thanksgiving each year, and in 1789 George Washington issued the first national Thanksgiving proclamation which called upon Americans to express their gratitude for victory in the war of independence and for the successful ratification of the U.S. Constitution. In 1817, Pennsylvania and New York were among several states to officially adopt an annual Thanksgiving holiday; each celebrated it on a different day, however, and the American South remained largely unfamiliar with the tradition.

In 1827, Massachusetts magazine editor Sarah Josepha Hale—author of the nursery rhyme “Mary Had a Little Lamb”—launched a campaign to establish Thanksgiving as a national holiday. But it wasn’t until 1863, in the midst of the Civil War, that President Abraham Lincoln proclaimed a national Thanksgiving Day to be held each November. Ms. Hale is also credited with making turkey the centerpiece of the Thanksgiving table.



While you may think that football is the most recent addition to our Thanksgiving festivities, you'd be wrong! The fledgling Intercollegiate Football Association scheduled its first championship game on Thanksgiving Day in 1876. By 1900, thousands of high schools and colleges were hosting Thanksgiving Day games. The first national radio

broadcast of an NFL turkey day game aired in 1934 and featured the Detroit Lions and the Chicago Bears. Thanksgiving embraced televised football in 1956, and the rest, as sports fans say, is history.

During the early 1900s, public school teachers picked up on the idea of using the Thanksgiving Day holiday to introduce immigrant children to U.S. history and help to "Americanize" them and their families. Pupils learned the story of the first Thanksgiving and invited their parents to watch them perform in Thanksgiving pageants.

While the roots of Thanksgiving were religious, by the 20th century a decidedly secular tone was creeping in. The first Thanksgiving Day parade occurred in Philadelphia in 1920 when Ellis Gimbel of Gimbels Department Stores sent fifty costumed employees to parade in the street to lure customers to his toy department. In 1924, employees of the R. H. Macy and Company in New York City, many of whom were immigrants and first-generation Americans, organized a parade to give thanks for their new adopted country.

It's safe to assume that the very puritanical settlers who broke bread with the Native Americans in 1621 (and who did not even approve of celebrating Christmas) would be quite bemused by our current Thanksgiving traditions. What would they make of frozen turkeys, clogged airports, pumpkin spiced lattes and Black Friday? How would they process giant balloons, football frenzy and Santa Claus coming to town? Somehow, to us, this all makes sense, so grab a seat at the table, loosen your belts and enjoy this most American of holidays. ***Happy Thanksgiving!***

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