

This Week in Saratoga County History

The First “American” Thanksgiving

Submitted by Sean Kelleher November 23, 2022

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Most people remember the first American Thanksgiving being held by pilgrims at Plymouth in what is now Massachusetts in the year 1621. According to the story, the English colonists feasted for three days in the autumn of that year to celebrate their first harvest in the new world.

America’s first national Thanksgiving holiday however came more than 150 years later. It was declared by the Continental Congress to commemorate the victory of the American army of General Horatio Gates over British forces commanded by General John Burgoyne in Saratoga, New York on October 17, 1777.

The triumph at Saratoga, America’s Turning Point in the eight-year War of Independence was the first time in world history an entire British army had been captured. What’s more, the victory reversed a long string of humiliating defeats for the 13 rebellious colonies, including the loss of the American capital in Philadelphia.

Congress responded to the news of the Saratoga victory by appointing a committee consisting of Samuel Adams of Massachusetts, Richard Henry Lee of Virginia, and Daniel Roberdeau of Pennsylvania to draft a report and resolution. The motion, which was adopted November 1, declared Thursday, December 18 as day for “Solemn Thanksgiving and Praise” and “to inspire our Commanders both by Land and Sea, and all under them, with that Wisdom and Fortitude which may render them fit Instruments, under the Providence of Almighty GOD, to secure for these United States the greatest of all human blessings, INDEPENDENCE and PEACE...”

General George Washington issued orders for the holiday to be observed by the Continental Army. He wrote:

“Being the day set apart by the Honorable Congress for public Thanksgiving and Praise; and duty calling us devoutly to express our grateful acknowledgements to God for the manifold blessings he has granted us, the General directs that the army remain in its present quarters, and that the Chaplains perform divine service with their several Corps and brigades. And earnestly exhorts, all officers and soldiers, whose absence is not indispensably necessary, to attend with reverence the solemnities of the day.”

Reverend Israel Evans, Chaplain to General Poor’s New Hampshire brigade, preached at least one of the Thanksgiving sermons. Discourse Evans urged his listeners:

“Oh give thanks unto the Lord our God, for a brave general, the commander in chief of all our armies. A general possessed of such unparalleled fortitude and patience, and not more patient, than meek, virtuous and humane. And if I am permitted to say anything of a character, which so much outshines the brightest encomiums the writer can offer: I will venture to say, that if you search for faults, in the conduct of that true patriot, and most excellent hero, you will find none, unless you call it a fault to exercise compassion and lenity towards those negligent and guilty offenders, who by their sloth and inattention to the best orders, counteract the wisest plans, and frustrate the best schemes of military discipline and policy. . . . Oh America, give glory to God for such a faithful hero! Then you saw him greatest when most without your aid. Collected in himself, he greatly resolved, with his few faithful followers, to be the barrier of liberty, or fall in its defence.”

An accurate account of how the hungry and ill-equipped Continental soldiers spent America’s first national Thanksgiving holiday can be found in the memoirs of Private Joseph Plumb Martin:

“While we lay here there was a Continental Thanksgiving ordered by Congress, and as the army had all the cause in the world to be particularly thankful, if not for being well off, at least that it was no worse, we were ordered to participate in it. We had nothing to eat for two or three days previous, except what the trees and the fields and forests afforded us. But we must now have what Congress said, a sumptuous Thanksgiving to close the year of high living we had now nearly even brought to a close. Well, to add something extraordinary to our present stock of provisions, our country, every mindful of its suffering army, opened her sympathizing heart so wide, upon this occasion, as to give us something to make the world stare. And what do you think it was, dear reader? Guess. You cannot guess, be you as much of a Yankee as you will. I will tell you; it gave each and every man half a gill [note: a gill is about four ounces] of rice and a tablespoonful of vinegar!!

After we had made sure of this extraordinary superabundant donation, we were ordered out to attend a meeting and hear a sermon delivered upon the happy occasion. We accordingly went, so we could not help it. I heard a sermon, a ‘thanksgiving sermon’, what sort of one I do not know now, nor did I at the time I heard it. I had something else to think upon. My belly put me in remembrance of the fine Thanksgiving dinner I was to

partake of when I could get it. Well, we had got through the services of the day and had nothing to do but to return in good order to our tents and fare as we could. ... So I had nothing else to do but to go home and make out my supper as usual, upon a leg of nothing and no turnips.”

Over the years, the word “thanksgiving” has evolved, originally Governors marked days of Thanksgivings by religious services to give thanks to God, or to celebrate a bountiful harvest. General George Washington frequently declared days of thanksgiving for the Continental Army. As President, Washington proclaimed a national day of Thanksgiving in 1789. President Abraham Lincoln again established Thanksgiving as a national holiday during the Civil War, cementing the feast as an American tradition. In 1941, the date was established as the last Thursday in November.