



# SONS of the AMERICAN REVOLUTION

Patriotic ★ Historical ★ Educational

## Our Revolutionary War Generation's Thanksgivings

**Politics aside Thanksgiving remained a solid religious occasion for our Founders**

Over the years, Thanksgiving proclamations have demonstrated a consistent theme as they were first issued by our Revolutionary War generation. They all believed God was active in the world and intervened in the affairs of men, particularly those of the colonies during our war with England. Thus, Thanksgiving was a day for the nation to celebrate our national blessings, and not just for the blessings received as individual citizens.

While Abraham Lincoln's 1863 Emancipation Proclamation established Thanksgiving as the national holiday, our Revolutionary War Patriots had already created the occasion we celebrate today, 85 years before Lincoln's historic proclamation, and 157 years after the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock.



**Samuel P. "Preston" Adams, III**  
47th President (2023)  
Saramana SAR Chapter

Thanksgiving was a solemn public occasion on November 1, 1878, when it was proclaimed by the Congress in York, Pennsylvania following General George Washington's victory at the Battle of Saratoga on October 7<sup>th</sup> of the previous year. It was not an occasion celebrated with athletic games, parades, or private meals, rather it was celebrated with reverence to God with gratitude for the favorable turn of events during the ongoing Revolutionary War.



Following the formal alliance with France Congress set aside December 30, 1778, as a day of public thanksgiving and praise, that all the people may, with united hearts, on that day, express a just sense of his unmerited favors; particularly in that it caused King Louis of France to enter the war on the American side and giving the Americans their first strategic victory over British troops at Saratoga.

By 1779 colonial divine interventions expanded to include, progress in the war, a productive agricultural year, commerce, and the spread of the gospel. Then in 1780, after the discovery of Benedict Arnold's betrayal and plans to surrender West Point, the Congressional Thanksgiving proclamation thanked God for "rescuing" General Washington and his army from imminent dangers, at the moment when treason was justification for prompt execution.

Finally, on October 19, 1781, at exactly 10:30 a.m. in Yorktown, Virginia, the American Revolutionary War ended with the siege of Yorktown and the surrender and capture of General Cornwallis and his army.

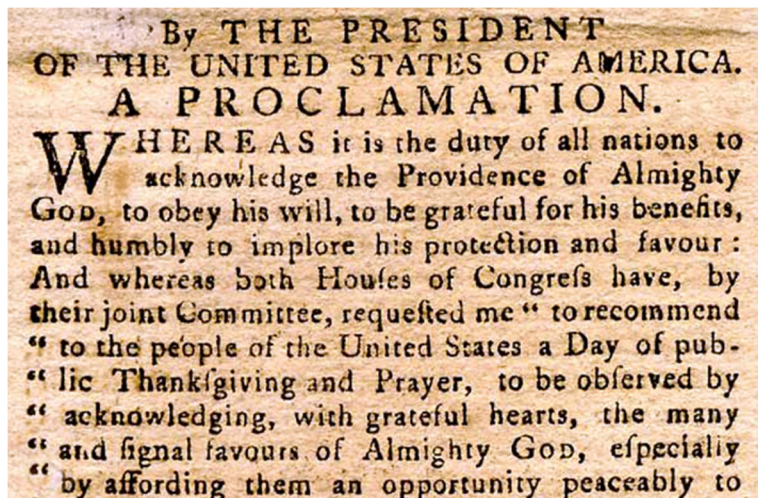
It was a decisive victory by a combined the forces of the American Continental Army troops led by General Washington with support from Marquis de Lafayette, French Army troops led by Comte de Rochambeau, and a French naval force commanded by François Joseph Paul Comte de Grasse, over the British Army commanded by British Lieutenant General Charles Cornwallis. This Continental Army victory at Yorktown prompted the British government to negotiate an end to the conflict.



In 1784, with the war ending, Congress concluded, *“the benign interposition of Divine Providence hath, on many occasions, been most miraculously and abundantly manifested.”* For his part, Washington called upon the American people to *“unite”* or *“meet together”* in a day of *“public thanksgiving and prayer.”* Even Madison, who was dedicated to separating church from state, bowed to the religious nature of Thanksgiving, marking the day as one *“on which the people of every religious denomination may in their solemn assemblies unite in their hearts and their voices in a freewill offering to their Heavenly Benefactor of their homage of thanksgiving and their songs of praise.”*

While in England the Puritans had earlier started the practice of thanksgivings during the English Civil War, it died out after the 1660 Stuart Restoration of the monarchy in the kingdoms of England, Scotland, and Ireland. Yet, the day remained a tradition in New England with colonial Puritans, and was often conceptually paired with days of fasting that served as a penance for sins and the supplication for future blessings. Over its lifetime, the Continental Congress issued nine separate proclamations calling for days of fasting and thanksgiving.

By the time of the First Continental Congress in 1774, days of thanksgiving had become intertwined with politics, as many in the Revolutionary War generation identified liberty as a divine gift that they were obligated to defend. Calls for days of thanksgiving throughout the colonies had the added benefit of promoting unity by allowing everyone to demonstrate their colonial commitment to the Patriot cause for our liberation from England.



In his first year as president in 1789 under the new constitution, George Washington offered the first federal Thanksgiving proclamation. He proclaimed a national Thanksgiving day for the end of November, *“That we may then all unite in rendering unto him our sincere and humble thanks”* – for this kind care and protection of the People of this country previous to their becoming a Nation – for the signal and manifold mercies, and the favorable interpositions of his providence.

Returning to that first Proclamation in 1778 throughout it all, the Continental Congress sought a remarkably consistent set of blessings. Even James Madison, who was dedicated to separating church from state, bowed to the religious nature of Thanksgiving, marking the day as one, *“on which the people of every religious denomination may in their solemn assemblies unite in their hearts and their voices in a freewill offering to their Heavenly Benefactor of their homage of thanksgiving and of their songs of praise.”*



But, just as America has changed since the Revolutionary Period, so has Thanksgiving today become more secular and private. While our founders would not recognize many of today’s traditions, there is nothing to stop us from understanding theirs.

Perhaps, as we gather for the holidays this year, we might recall those first thanksgivings that Americans celebrated as a country fighting for their liberty from England. This was a time when they gave thanks for the nation’s blessings, and not just for the blessings that graced the lives of those around the family dining room table.

With another holiday season of televised football games, parades, and parties ending with Santa Claus and a New Year, it is worth our revisiting those first days of thanks for the divine providence, which our American Patriots fought for and celebrated as a new nation under God.

Here’s wishing you and your family a very Happy Thanksgiving.

Yours in Patriotism,

*Samuel Preston Adams 3rd*

47<sup>th</sup> President, Saramana SAR Chapter (2023)

