



MISSOURI SENATE

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**A Weekly Column for the
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The First Thanksgiving

JEFFERSON CITY – In 1621 the Plymouth colonists and the Wampanoag Indians shared an autumn harvest which is now known as the first Thanksgiving. Unlike our modern holiday, it was three days long and occurred sometime between September 21 and November 11. The event was based on English harvest festivals, which traditionally occurred around the end of September.

After that first harvest was completed by the Plymouth colonists, Gov. William Bradford proclaimed a day of thanksgiving and prayer, shared by all of the colonists and neighboring Indians. In 1623, a day of fasting and prayer during a period of drought was changed to one of thanksgiving because the rain came during the prayers. Gradually the custom prevailed in New England of annually celebrating thanksgiving after the harvest.

During the American Revolution a yearly day of national thanksgiving was suggested by the Continental Congress. In 1817, New York State adopted Thanksgiving Day as an annual custom, and by the middle of the 19th century many other states had done the same.

In 1863, President Abraham Lincoln appointed a day of thanksgiving as the last Thursday in November, which he may have correlated with the November 21, 1621 anchoring of the Mayflower at Cape Cop. Since then, each president has issued a Thanksgiving Day proclamation. President Franklin D. Roosevelt set the date for Thanksgiving to the fourth Thursday of November in 1939, which was approved by Congress in 1941.

What foods were on the table at that first harvest feast? It's safe to say the pilgrims were not savoring cranberry relish or gobbling up pumpkin pie. In fact, historians are certain only that they feasted on venison and wild fowl.

The most detailed description of the “First Thanksgiving” comes from Edward Winslow’s A Journal of the Pilgrims at Plymouth, in 1621:

“Our harvest being gotten in, our governor sent four men on fowling, that so we might after a special manner rejoice together after we had gathered the fruit of our labors. They four in one day killed as much fowl as, with a little help beside, served the company almost a week. At which time, among other recreations, we exercised our arms, many of the Indians coming amongst us, and among 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 upon our governor, and upon the captain, and others. And although it be not always so plentiful as it was at this time with us, yet by the goodness of God, we are so far from want that we often wish you partakers of our plenty.”

As we rub our stuffed bellies and flip through football games on Thanksgiving Day, I urge everyone to remain focused on what this day truly means. Those who came before us did not have much, yet they knew to give thanks for what they did have.

Let us focus on the blessings of life and liberty, of family and friends, and of the privilege we have of living in this land of plenty.

If you have any questions or comments about this or any other issue, give my Capitol office a call at (573) 751-7852, send me an email at wes.shoemyer@senate.mo.gov, or drop a line to Room 434, State Capitol, 201 West Capitol Ave., Jefferson City, MO 65101.