

Alexandria Times

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A history of Thanksgiving in Alexandria

While we often emphasize the 1621 celebration in Plymouth Colony, the first documented Thanksgiving celebration by English colonists occurred in Virginia on Dec. 3, 1619. An expedition of 38 men under the command of Capt. John Woodlief arrived from England to the 6,000-acre Berkeley grant, now Berkeley Plantation.

Following the dictates of their sponsor, the London Company, the group declared a day of thanksgiving, promising it would be “kept yearly and perpetually as a day of Thanksgiving to Almighty God.” And they kept their promise until 1622, when the settlers were massacred in March.

Alexandria in the 18th and 19th centuries, like many other southern municipalities, was reluctant to celebrate Thanksgiving as we know it. Despite President George Washington’s proclamation that Nov. 26, 1789, was to be a national celebration, the holiday was often considered a northern tradition.

However, a resident wrote to the Alexandria Gazette in 1839 that they “rejoiced to find that the good old-fashioned

**MAYOR'S PROCLAMATION.**  
**MAYOR'S OFFICE, ALEXANDRIA, VA., }**  
**NOVEMBER 16, 1853. }**

**P**URSUANT to the request of many citizens, that a day be specially designated by the Mayor, to be religiously observed as a day of **THANKSGIVING AND PRAISE TO HIM** from whom all blessings flow--

*“All the blessings of the fields,  
All the stores the garden yields,  
Flocks that whiten all the plain,  
Yellow sheaves of ripened grain--”*

**I hereby respectfully recommend that the citizens of the City of Alexandria, close their several places of business on Thursday, the 24th instant.**

**It is also further requested that the Ministers of the Gospel open their respective churches for Divine Worship, on said day, that our citizens may, simultaneously with millions of other inhabitants of our glorious Union, sing Praises unto the Almighty--**

*“For the plenty summer pours,  
Autumn's rich o'erflowing stores,  
Peace, prosperity, and health,  
Private bliss and public wealth.”*

**Given under my hand, the day and year above written.**  
**JOHN MUIR, Mayor.**  
**nov 17--1853 (Stand. & Sent. 3t)**

Text from  
the Nov.  
17, 1853,  
Alexandria  
Gazette  
regarding  
Thanksgiving  
in Alexandria.

PHOTO/  
HISTORIC  
ALEXANDRIA/  
ALEXANDRIA  
GAZETTE

Other Virginia cities held their own observances, including Richmond, Fredericksburg and Winchester.

The holiday did not enjoy universal acceptance in our town. As tension between the states grew, so did opposition to celebrating this “northern” tradition. In 1858, just two years after Wise’s observation of the holiday, then-Mayor William D. Massey requested a day of Thanksgiving that would include closing local businesses.

The Common Council voted down the request 10-3. Some of the council members who voted against the proposal were Benjamin Hollowell and George H. Smoot. It was the first time the Common Council had rejected a mayoral proposal for a city holiday.

The occupying Union Army reinstituted the celebration of Thanksgiving in Alexandria as early as 1861. Lincoln established the celebration as a national holiday in 1863, and Alexandria has observed Thanksgiving every year since then.

*Out of the Attic is  
provided by the Office of  
Historic Alexandria.*

custom prevalent in the Northern States ... was to be observed in Alexandria on Friday, Dec. 13.” Another writer argued in 1850 that 21 other states observed the tradition, and that the town’s lack of public health epidemics was as good as any to observe a day of thanks.

The religious aspect of the holiday encouraged local clergy to advocate its spirit, if not its observance. For instance, the Rev. Joshua N. Danforth of the Second Presbyterian Church

presented “A Thanksgiving Oration” to his congregants on Nov. 27, 1851. The oration was published in the Gazette the next week.

The public support for a local celebration grew so much in 1853 that Mayor John Muir declared Nov. 24 a local holiday and recommended that local businesses close. The local response was generally positive, and three years later, Mayor George P. Wise designated Nov. 20 a day of thanksgiving.