



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

Early Thanksgiving in Alexandria

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Image: Alexandria Times file photo,

Despite conventional history emphasizing the celebration in Plymouth colony in 1621, the first documented Thanksgiving celebration by English colonists was celebrated 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, 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 custom prevalent in the Northern States ... was to be observed in Alexandria on Friday, Dec. 13.” (Alexandria Gazette, Dec. 13, 1839). 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 November 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 November 20 a day of thanksgiving. Other Virginia cities held their own observances, including Richmond, Fredericksburg and Winchester.

The holiday did not enjoy an unopposed acceptance in our town. As tension between the states grew, so did opposition to celebrating this “northern” tradition. In 1858, then-Mayor William D. Massey requested a day of Thanksgiving which would include closing local businesses. The Common Council voted down the request 10 to 3. Some of the council members who voted against the proposal were Benjamin Hallowell and George H. Smoot. It was the first time the Common Council had rejected a mayoral proposal for a city holiday.





Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

The occupying Union Army reinstated the celebration of Thanksgiving in Alexandria, as early as 1861. Lincoln established the celebration as a national holiday in 1863, and Alexandria has not skipped one since.

“Out of the Attic” is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as “Marking Time” and explored Alexandria’s history through collection items, historical images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into “Out of the Attic” and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.

These articles appear with the permission of the Alexandria Times and were authored by staff of the Office of Historic Alexandria.