

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, November 26, 2018

History of Thanksgiving: Most of us know the first Thanksgiving was celebrated by the Pilgrims near Plymouth Rock, about 40 miles southeast of present-day Boston. A group of 102 men, women, and children were delivered by Captain Christopher Jones of the Mayflower to the New England shore a few days before Christmas in 1620. Urged to keep the Mayflower anchored off shore for the balance of that first harsh winter, Jones allowed his passengers to live aboard ship, while the sturdy men in the group attempted to build primitive shelters ashore. The women and children never left the Mayflower, and when spring arrived, only 56 of the 102 passengers were still alive. In April 1621, Jones and the Mayflower sailed for England. He had offered to take anyone back who wanted to go, but he had no takers.

Making favorable treaties with the native Indians, and having a bountiful harvest, a time of Thanksgiving took place, lasting at least three days, probably in October 1621, at which time both Native American and English dishes were served. The pilgrims enjoyed wild turkeys, as well as fish and other game. Only four women who had sailed on the Mayflower were alive at that event.

Several more ships arrived in the 1620s, bringing English settlers who wanted to govern themselves, and by 1630, settlements dotted the shore of Massachusetts Bay, now considered Boston's south shore. The size of the Massachusetts Bay Colony soon outnumbered that of Plymouth, but they remained as separate colonies (along with several others) until all were incorporated into Massachusetts Bay in the 1690s. The idea of an annual day of Thanksgiving prevailed throughout the region, although the exact date varied from colony to colony. Many books and poems were written over the years about the Plymouth Colony. Although partially fictional, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's 1858 poem "The Courtship of Miles Standish" was a favorite of mine. When Standish asked his friend John Alden to propose to Priscilla Mullins on his behalf, her reply was, "Speak for yourself, John." Dr. John W. Alden of Wilmington, a direct descendant of John and Priscilla, was a client of ours in the travel agency.

A re-creation of the Plymouth Colony as it existed in 1627 was built in the 1970s on a piece of ground about 3 miles from the original Plymouth. Along with Frank Gardner, Frank Johnson, and Bob Wilde, all deceased, I visited historic "Plimoth Plantation" about 1980. Bob Wilde had designed and built some of the models in the reception center. It was the first time I had experienced living history, where professional actors portrayed the original residents of Plymouth. I kept asking to see Governor Bradford and was referred from house to house. Some tourists, not heeding the advice of those working in the reception center, would ask the actors whether the furnishings were originals or antiques. The actors would be puzzled and asked the meaning of "antiques." They frequently referred to their neighbors of the "Cape of Cod."

In 18th-century America, a day of Thanksgiving was celebrated throughout the colonies, more or less toward the end of November each year. It became a traditional family holiday, accompanied by a bountiful feast. A Thursday late in November was usually the time, but it was not set on a particular date. Finally, in 1863 during the height of America's Civil War, President Lincoln established the last Thursday in November to be a national holiday of Thanksgiving. And so it remained into the 1930s, when I grew up.

With pressure mounting from merchants whose profitable shopping season occurred between Thanksgiving and Christmas each year, President Franklin D. Roosevelt changed the date to November's fourth Thursday, often giving the shopping season nearly an extra week. However, this change was not universally accepted, and some communities celebrated the fourth Thursday, while others celebrated the last. In Irving Berlin's excellent Hollywood musical "Holiday Inn," released for the 1942 holiday season, a turkey is jumping back and forth between the third and fourth as not everyone was celebrating on the same day. In this film, Bing Crosby sang "White Christmas" and "Easter Parade" for the first time.

In the 1930s, the annual football game between the two arch-rivals, Cornell and the University of Pennsylvania, occurred on Thanksgiving Day, usually at Franklin Field in Philadelphia. An even more important game, the annual Army-Navy football rivalry, was held at Memorial Stadium in South Philadelphia on the Saturday after Thanksgiving. Many special trains on the Pennsylvania Railroad brought not only cadets and midshipmen from West Point and Annapolis, but many other spectators from the major eastern cities. The railroad spur to the stadium came off the main line just outside 30th Street Station and continued as an elevated line over Gray's Ferry Avenue to Passyunk Avenue and on to the numerous sidings near the stadium. Rail fans of that time had a field day inspecting the railroad cars near the stadium for a few hours.

When I was younger, I could tell of about four catastrophes that had occurred on the Saturday after Thanksgiving. It was a dangerous day. Only one now comes to mind, but it was a disastrous one. It was the Coconut Grove Night Club Fire in Boston on the Saturday after Thanksgiving in 1942 that claimed nearly 500 lives.

Dick Mullikin and I shared a room at 329 Commonwealth Avenue in Boston; he was a sophomore at M.I.T., and I was a freshman. We had enjoyed a full-course Thanksgiving dinner at the Hotel Touraine across the street from the higher quality Hotel Bradford, south of the Boston Common, and we had paid \$1.75 plus 5% Massachusetts Old Age Tax, about 3 times what we were used to paying for our evening meal. A tip of 10% was expected. On November 28, the Saturday following Thanksgiving, we attended a popular Hollywood production, "Mrs. Miniver," starring Greer Garson and Walter Pidgeon, at a movie house on Huntington Avenue, about 1/2 mile from our lodgings. Returning before 11 P.M., we retired for the night.

Very soon we were awakened by sirens and ambulances speeding along Commonwealth Avenue. We got dressed to investigate. Just over one mile away, the Coconut Grove was a popular nightclub on a side street behind the Hotel Bradford, and it was packed to capacity with nearly 600 customers, all celebrating something. Holy Cross University in Worcester had scored an upset football game victory that afternoon in a 55-12 rout over heavily favored Boston College, and many Holy Cross supporters were celebrating at the Coconut Grove. Also, a lot of servicemen were there, including a family of four, all in the Service, from Wilmington, Massachusetts. I think entertainers Grace Moore and Buck Jones were also there. Something started a fire, and everyone piled against the exit doors that opened "in," the wrong way. A total of 492 inside lost their lives. Mullikin ran to the site, but he really could not get close. In terms of human catastrophes, this night ranked for many years with the Chicago Fire of 1871 and the Iroquois Theatre fire in Baltimore in 1904 as the worst in U.S. history.