

**November 23, 2022**

**Dear Friends of Hallie Q. Brown,**

Every year, on the fourth Thursday of November, Americans gather at homes of family, related or intentional, make holiday food favorites and settle in to an afternoon of football or games or shopping and other activities; coming together to give thanks in the tradition of our forefathers...

Well, most "Americans..."

When I was in grad school in the late 90s, I took a trip during the Thanksgiving break to Columbus, MS to enjoy the holiday with my Grandmother and Uncle Brian who lived down there, accompanied by my girlfriend at the time. My uncle had to work at the last minute and so just his girlfriend attended along with my girlfriend, myself and my grandmother.



The meal was good and there was a quaint sense of Norman Rockwell-esque spirit as we settled down for dinner and into the evening. What broke that serenity up, however, was my uncle's girlfriend. She complained about how the local elementary school (in which her niece was enrolled) was teaching about Thanksgiving. I paused and listened intently and wondered what controversial and revelatory thing the school might have been imparting on her niece. Was the Bible Belt not as conservative as I'd been taught? She continued on, almost shaking, as she relayed her anger that the school had been teaching that the "settlers" had barely made it through the winter and that the Native Americans had saved them by teaching them to farm and by sharing a feast from the harvest with them.

I was confused. This was the same story I had learned growing up. It didn't seem like much had changed in 20 years, even though this was the South. Then it became clear what had changed as my uncle's girlfriend continued on to relay that she was outraged that they weren't teaching "the truth," which (in her mind) was "that God had provided a bounty to the Pilgrims and they had been kind enough to share it with the noble savages..."

I was at a loss for words but still tried to explain that the school's version was correct and how it seemed unusual that the Native Americans, who had been there for centuries were unable to provide for themselves all of a sudden? But she could not hear it. So centered was she in her belief that it was unshakable no matter how many facts were put in front of her. I decided to

allow the matter to lie since we would not see each other again for the foreseeable future and did not want to ruin my grandmother's evening.

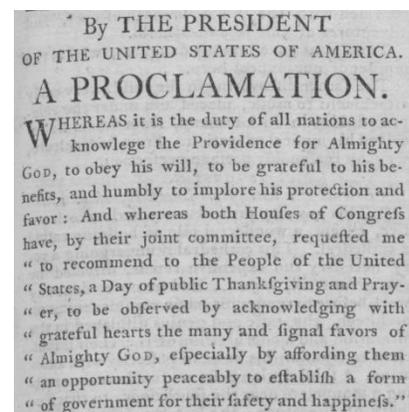
In reality, we were both wrong.



"Days of Thanksgiving" have roots going back to the early 16th century in England in both the Protestant Reformation and fall harvest. Days of Fasting and Days of Thanksgiving were originally proposed by the Puritans to replace the remaining 27 church holidays (reduced from 95 by the 1536 reforms), including Christmas and Easter. These were days brought on by divine providence, with Days of Fasting being in response to unexpected disasters such as

plagues, droughts and floods; and Days of Thanksgiving in response to special blessings such as military victories, royal births or protection of the monarch. When English colonizers landed in Virginia in 1619, it was in their charter that they were to have annual Thanksgiving prayers. What is acknowledged (though debated) as the first Thanksgiving is when Plymouth colonists shared an autumn harvest feast with the Wampanoag Indians in 1621. The feast represented the Wampanoag sharing food, which was scarce for the Pilgrims, in exchange for protection from a rival tribe. The second one was held in 1623 after a long drought that threatened the harvest. The drought was so bad that the Governor had called for a day of fasting before the celebration, which quickly became something joined with the holiday.

Prior to the American Revolution, Days of Thanksgiving were proclaimed by church (primarily up to the 1680s) and government leaders. During the Revolution, it became a tool of both sides with Royal Governors and Revolutionary Leaders both making proclamations to commemorate things their side had done. In 1789, George Washington issued [the first Thanksgiving proclamation of the United States](#). Days of Thanksgiving were proclaimed by other presidents as well, sometimes several in a year. While the colonies would have several Thanksgiving feast over the two centuries following the first, it wasn't until 1863, in the midst of the American Civil War, and thanks to a 36-year campaign by [Sarah Josepha Hale](#), that President Lincoln would make it a permanent holiday and affix it to the final Thursday in November. [President Roosevelt was actually the one who signed the bill into law in 1941 making it the 4th Thursday in November annually.](#)



When you view the history of thanksgivings in America, it can seem not only unsettled, but fairly innocuous, almost mundane, and no explanation why this would be such an issue for

Native Americans or anyone else. Ironically, this is the same battle that proponents of Critical Race Theory are having today, as they try to get people to understand how much of what we know about history is shaped by political and white supremacist agendas meant to cover over the narrative and hide the truth of what really transpired throughout our history because the reality makes white people look bad...REALLY bad.



Looking back at the events SURROUNDING the first Thanksgiving, however, presents a clearer picture of what happened and [why many indigenous people take issue with the "holiday"](#). When the Pilgrims first arrived, the chief of the Wampanoags agreed to an informal alliance for protection from the Narragansett. An alliance that the Pilgrims were constantly testing the boundaries of over the next 50 years with Colonial land expansion, the spread of disease and the exploitation of resources on their land. Essentially, the colonizers kept pushing

and pushing within the alliance until matters erupted into King Philip's War which devastated the Wampanoag. Thanksgiving is regarded by many Native Americans as a day of mourning because it represents the incursion of English colonizers onto American soil. It is the start of what would become the genocide of the Indigenous people. Because of its originally flexible nature, it would often accompany victories over Native communities and the associated atrocities committed. It is very real and very painful.

So perhaps it is time to redefine Thanksgiving, not as a Pilgrim/Puritan holiday, not as something associated with the arrival of colonizers to this country, not as a religious proclamation, but perhaps, quite simply, as a day to just be thankful and reflect. A day in which we, as a country, are thankful for the good people and things in our lives, but also stop and reflect on those who are less fortunate and do not have the means to have the Norman Rockwell-esque Thanksgiving. A day to reflect upon the harm done by this country in the name of progress or advancement, especially against our Native brothers and sisters--NOT so that we can feel bad or regret, but to recognize our responsibility to address and correct as much as possible because we enjoy the results of those earliest transgressions.

Thanksgiving has a deep and muddled history. But it is also "low hanging fruit" when you understand the flexible nature of the original celebration and therein, the ability to change it. We can "reboot" Thanksgiving as a day that everyone can celebrate, not by focusing on the arrival of English colonizers, but by teaching schoolchildren about the importance of reflecting on blessings instead of telling tales of skewed histories that omit injustice. We can use it as a day to reflect on what our Native brothers and sisters have sacrificed in the name of establishing this country. But most of all we can use it as a day to reflect on the tragedies visited on the Native people and use it as a day to acknowledge them and the struggles they endured.

And maybe, I don't know, just maybe, take a step towards healing in our nation.

It is right.  
It is just.  
And Lord knows, it is time.

Respectfully

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'JP Palmer', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Jonathan Palmer  
Executive Director

For more information and details on this and other significant periods of history, please visit our [Addressing Systemic Racism](#) page on our website.