

# A Canadian Thanksgiving

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In Canada, Thanksgiving is celebrated on the second Monday in October. The first Thanksgiving was observed around 1578. Martin Frobisher, an English navigator who, like many other early explorers, was searching for a Northwest Passage to the Orient and for riches in the form of gold or spices, anchored his ships in Frobisher Bay—between the islands of Baffin and what is now Newfoundland.

He established a settlement and held the first Thanksgiving in Newfoundland to celebrate surviving the long sea journey. Note that this Canadian Thanksgiving predated the Thanksgiving celebrated by the Pilgrims and Native Americans in what is now Massachusetts by more than 40 years. In fact, the Native Americans' first words to the Pilgrims when they arrived were, "Welcome, Englishmen," since they had learned English from fishermen and previous settlers to the New World!

## Other Reasons for Celebration

In the early 1600s, French explorer Samuel de Champlain arrived with French settlers in what is now Canada. He also held feasts of thanksgiving called the "Order of Good Cheer." Like the Pilgrims some years later, they also shared the feast with their Native American neighbors as a token of goodwill.



Other early Canadian thanksgiving celebrations honored military victories. Records from Port Royal (Nova Scotia) state that on October 10, 1710, a day of thanksgiving was held to mark the return of the town from the French to the English. In 1760, a day of thanksgiving at Halifax marked the victory of British General Jeffrey Amherst's troops at Montreal. In 1763, Halifax celebrated the end of the Seven Years' War with a day of thanksgiving.

Another source says that some early Thanksgivings celebrated the birth of royal children and that the celebrations of early Scottish settlers of Nova Scotia emphasized the religious aspect of giving thanks. Another historian claims that in 1762 Halifax was the first community to give thanks for "a bountiful harvest." A decade or two later during the Revolutionary War, many Americans who were loyal to England moved to Canada and brought American Thanksgiving traditions with them.

## Making It Official

Longstanding traditions did not make the celebration of Thanksgiving official, however. In the United States, Thanksgiving became an official holiday celebrated on the fourth Thursday of November by proclamation of President Abraham Lincoln in 1863. In Canada, the date for Thanksgiving changed a number of times. In 1879, the Canadian Parliament declared November 6 for the national holiday, and it was long tied to Armistice or Remembrance Day the same week. (We celebrate Remembrance Day as Veteran's Day on November 11.) Finally, in 1957, Parliament announced that the second Monday in October would be "a day of general thanksgiving to

Almighty God for the bountiful harvest with which Canada has been blessed.” While most people were happy to have this special harvest celebration untied to any political or military events, former Ontario Premier E.C. Drury grumbled that it was a farmer’s holiday stolen by cities to provide them a long weekend when the weather was better than in winter. For those who wonder why Canada’s harvest celebration is a month before the U.S. celebration, it is generally thought that harvest celebrations have always been earlier in Canada because the growing season is shorter.

### **Not a New World Idea**

While early European settlers to the New World had many reasons to be grateful for their safe arrival and successful settlements, the idea of gratitude for the harvest was hardly new. So it is little wonder that they incorporated some of the Old World traditions into the New World celebration. In Europe, for instance, farmers celebrated their good harvests by filling cornucopias, usually a curved goat’s horn, with fruits and grains. Some say Thanksgiving’s true roots date back 2,000 years to Celtic priests, the druids, who celebrated a harvest festival. Once their summer’s harvest had been safely stored, the Celts prayed for their sun god in the coming battle with the darkness and cold of winter. The harvest season was of such importance that it marked the end of the Celtic calendar year. But the Celts were not alone in expressing gratitude: the Greeks honored Demeter, goddess of grains, at an autumn festival called Thesmophoria; and the Romans held the fall festival Cerealia to honor Ceres, goddess of corn, offering pigs and fruits to her.

### **Traditional Thanksgiving Foods**

While some Canadians have more access to wild game than most U.S. families—venison and water fowl, for example—Canadians serve turkey, ham, roasts, and side dishes similar to those served in the U.S. The meals have changed a great deal, however, from early Thanksgivings in both the U.S. and Canada, when the menu probably included fish, shellfish, dried fruit, corn, berries, and a heavy emphasis on game, such as venison, and such fowl as geese, ducks, wild turkey, and perhaps even a swan or two. Since cows had not yet been brought over from Europe, there were no dairy products.

(Although perhaps there were cheese and milk from goats.) It is interesting to note, however, that in the years between the first Thanksgivings in the 1600s and those in the last century, the protein product of choice was as likely to be beef or pork as turkey, because by the 1700s, pigs and cattle *had* been brought to the New World. Pigeon pasties (pies) were also popular, and a wide variety of vegetables had found new ground. Other vegetables, such as celery, which was native to New World soil, found new converts. A traditional Thanksgiving dinner today might include pickles, olives, celery, roast turkey, oyster stew, cranberry sauce, giblet gravy, dressing, creamed asparagus tips, snowflake potatoes, baked carrots, hot rolls, fruit salad, mince meat pie, fruit cake, candies, grapes, apples, and French drip coffee. Yum, is there room at the table for one more?



### **Discussion Starters**

- Thanksgiving is celebrated in October in Canada and in November in the U.S. Which do you think is the better month to celebrate Thanksgiving and why?
- What does Thanksgiving mean to you? Do you celebrate by “giving thanks”? If so, can you recall some of the things you have given thanks for over the years?

- What are the foods you most enjoyed or the unusual foods you remember from Thanksgiving celebrations? Would you eat those foods now? Why or why not?
  - What traditional foods (from the description above) have you yet to try? Have others in the group tried these foods? If so, explain what the foods looked like and tasted like.  
**Bonus activity:** Sample some of those foods today.
  - Do you have any other favorite Thanksgiving holiday traditions, or are there any Thanksgiving traditions you'd like to start observing?
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