



Written by [Becky Akers](#) on November 25, 2009

Gathering Together in Freedom

Then there's the history behind this magnificent day: committed Christians exchanging the security and comforts of King James I's tyranny for freedom in the perilous, primitive New World. As all schoolchildren once knew, about half of the Mayflower's passengers died during their first winter in America. And yet the following spring, when the ship turned sail for England and home, none of the Pilgrims climbed aboard. More than 150 years before Patrick Henry uttered his immortal words about preferring death to political slavery, these saints lived that choice. "[Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty.](#)"

Such a splendid story requires a splendid score - and finds it in We Gather Together. It's fun to imagine the Pilgrims warbling the words over their trenchers of turkey and stuffing, candied yams and pumpkin pie. But that hymn in their mouths is as anachronistic as the dressing, potatoes, and pie are. True, the song seems to describe their plight as it reminds Christians that even those dictators Jehovah may use to discipline His people bow to His authority and desist at His command ("[God] chastens and hastens his will to make known./ The wicked oppressing now cease from distressing./Sing praises to his name, he forgets not his own").



But both the music and the lyrics are Dutch: poet Adrianus Valerius wrote the latter and set them to a folk tune when his countrymen defeated their Spanish conquerors at the battle of Turnhout in 1597. King Philip II of Spain had forbidden Holland's Protestants to assemble for worship; Valerius challenges that tyranny from his opening words (though as a tax collector and a burgher in the town of Veere, Valerius oppressed a bit himself). His song's popularity meant that the Dutch were probably still whistling and singing it when the Pilgrims sojourned there a decade later, so they likely knew it even if they didn't hum it: a Pilgrim's repertoire comprised only Biblical Psalms. In fact, no English translation appeared until the late 1800's. And only in the twentieth century did Americans bind We Gather Together inextricably to Thanksgiving.

But then, only in the nineteenth did Thanksgiving become a national holiday.



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The Continental Congress had appointed days of thanksgiving from time to time during the American Revolution. On November 1, 1777, for example, Congress had much for which to praise Providence: a fortnight earlier, Americans had decisively defeated the Redcoats and their Hessian allies at Saratoga, New York. And so, "[as it is the indispensable duty](#) of all men to adore the superintending providence of Almighty God; ... and it having pleased him in his abundant mercy ... to smile upon us in the prosecution of a just and necessary war, for the defence and establishment of our unalienable rights and liberties.... It is therefore recommended to the legislative or executive powers of these United States, to set apart Thursday, the eighteenth day of December next, for solemn thanksgiving and praise..." Americans should also make "penitent confession of their manifold sins, whereby they had forfeited every favour, and their humble and earnest supplication that it may please God, through the merits of Jesus Christ, mercifully to forgive and blot them out of remembrance; that it may please him graciously ... to prosper the means of religion for the promotion and enlargement of that kingdom which consisteth 'in righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Ghost.'" I hereby challenge the modern Congress to produce a statement even a fraction as articulate and sincerely devout.

When General George Washington became president, he continued the tradition and occasionally declared a day of thanksgiving; so did a few of his successors. But from the time of the Pilgrims to the Civil War, Thanksgiving was largely confined to New England, where each state scheduled its own day of gratitude to the Lord. These usually fell sometime between October and January.

That wasn't good enough for [Sarah Josepha Hale](#). Born in 1788, Sarah was a poet ("Mary Had a Little Lamb"), novelist (*Northwood: A Tale of New England*), and editor for 50 years of a magazine known during most of that time as *Godey's Lady's Book*. Alas, Sarah wasn't satisfied with these innocuous pursuits: she was also a member of that dread species, Reformer Americanus. She made the mistake so many have: a place, event, or person can't possibly be important nor sufficiently commemorated unless it has the imprimatur of the Federal government. Thanksgiving must therefore be a national holiday - and Sarah badgered presidents from Zachary Taylor to Abraham Lincoln to make it so. Lincoln listened, primarily because a national holiday, especially one with Thanksgiving's all-American resonance, would help cement the Union his war had nearly shattered.

Politicians since have refused to leave the holiday alone. One of the most egregious meddlers was [Franklin Roosevelt. In cahoots with Fred Lazarus](#), the chairman of Federated Department Stores (which included such emporia as Macy's and Filene's), Roosevelt bumped Thanksgiving up a week to prolong the shopping season for Christmas. Americans derided this as "Franksgiving" and celebrated on their customary last Thursday in November.

Presidents still try to co-opt this delightful holiday, pardoning turkeys (a professional courtesy?) and issuing proclamations. Ignore them. Like toddlers and prima donnas, politicians must be the center of attention. Why pay them heed as well as taxes?

Instead, sing [We Gather Together](#) fortissimo, until the leeches tremble at the last line and our fervency: "O Lord, make us free!"



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