



Forget Massachusetts, Texas Was the Site of the First Thanksgiving

by Scott Sosebee

The East Texas Historical Association provides this column as a public service.

Scott Sosebee is Executive Director of the Association and can be contacted at sosebeem@sfasu.edu.

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(Nov 11 2022) Every holiday has its certain charms, but my favorite holiday must be Thanksgiving. It has everything a holiday should have—contemplative reflection, wonderful food, a gathering of family, and, of course, football, football, and then some more football—and it is all over in one day. Thanksgiving normally conjures up images of dour Pilgrims in black and white clothes and buckle shoes, friendly Indians joining the new settlers at a feast, and lots of turkey, dressing, and pumpkin pie. It is a great story, and even if it is not exactly accurate at least it provides the nation with good symbolism.

The concept of “giving thanks” to God for many fortunes is one as old as the notion of a monotheistic religion; human beings have proclaimed their devotion and gratitude to a higher being through history for events ranging from deliverance from strife, successful journeys, and even triumphant wars. In the United States, President Abraham Lincoln established the first official “day of Thanksgiving” in 1863 as a way to honor those who had sacrificed during the Civil War. Franklin D. Roosevelt made Thanksgiving a recognized federal holiday to be observed on the last Thursday of November in 1939, primarily as a ploy to kick off the Christmas buying season; legislation made the holiday the fourth Thursday in 1941.

The “Pilgrim Story” has captured the nation’s fancy, but it is difficult to pinpoint the true “first” Thanksgiving. Thus, it is only fitting that Texas, a state that is home to two traditional football games on Thanksgiving, make a claim to the initial celebration. In fact, Texas can argue two accounts of the “first Thanksgiving.”

Both of Texas' rights to title for the "first Thanksgiving" go back to the era of Spanish exploration and initial colonization of what would become our state. Francisco Vazquez Coronado made the first intentional, organized excursion of exploration into the American Southwest from New Spain (Mexico) in 1541. Coronado trekked across what would become New Mexico and on into present-day Texas across the Llano Estacado. It was an arduous trip and accounts of the expedition note that when the Spaniards reached a "canyon" they gathered wild grapes and pecans to supplement their rations and held a "mass and feast of thanks." For years, historians interpreted the arrival of Coronado's expedition at a "canyon" as Palo Duro Canyon near contemporary Amarillo, but archeological studies and a closer reading of records now makes it predominantly clear that his route did not take him that far north and the "canyon" he wrote of was actually Blanco Canyon, which is farther south and nearer to Lubbock.

Since 1989, the residents of El Paso have honored another instance of "Thanksgiving," which now includes a civic celebration in the border city. Juan de Onate, a child of a wealthy mine developer in Zacatecas who also developed his own successful mine near San Luis Potosi petitioned the Spanish authorities in the early 1590s to allow him to explore and settle on the extreme northern frontier. The Spanish king granted him land along the northern Rio Grande among the Pueblo peoples of that region. Requests and bureaucracy moved very slowly in colonial Spain, and Onate was not allowed to proceed until 1597.

The normal route out of the interior of New Spain involved traveling to the confluence of the Rio Grande and the Rio Conchos and then north, but Onate's group took a more direct route. It was not the best choice since it involved making their way across the inhospitable Chihuahuan Desert. The expedition traversed the wasteland for fifty days, the last five of which they made with no food and very little water. When they finally reached the Rio Grande—at a place they would come to call "El Paso del Norte"—they immediately held a "mass of thanksgiving" for their deliverance from the travails of the journey.

So there you have it; instead of donning those dour black and white outfits and those tall hats that legend tells us were the clothes of choice for the Pilgrims, schoolchildren should instead wear Spanish armor. Because see, Thanksgiving did not originate in the cold climes of the Yankee state of Massachusetts—it is a Texas-born holiday. That's my story, and I am sticking to it.

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