



Thanksgiving:

Days of Thanks
and Despair in Wartime

Thanksgiving can occur on any date from Nov. 22-28 since being designated the fourth Thursday in November by a 1941 law. Here is a brief overview of some key dates in the history of this unique American holiday. The chronology incorporates representative battles from major wars that occurred on or around Thanksgiving. In the early years of the nation, special days of thanks were declared to commemorate military victories and so they are included even when occurring outside the month of November.



King Philip's War: Attack on Hadley, Mass., 1675
ENGRAVING BY J. STEPHENSON / E.H. COURBOULD / LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

- 1623:** Pilgrims hold their first true day of thanks.
- 1630:** Massachusetts Bay Colony (Puritans) celebrates its first day of thanks.
- 1675-76: KING PHILIP'S WAR** Connecticut cancels its day of thanks in 1675 because of the warfare.
- Fall 1676**—General Court of Connecticut declares a public day of thanks for “subduing our enemies.” This was the deadliest war per capita in American history: more than 600 colonists were killed (8% of adult males) and 2,000 Indians (10% of total population).
- 1680:** Massachusetts Bay Colony begins its annual festival of thanksgiving.
- 1754-63: FRENCH & INDIAN WAR**
 - 1758**—Nov. 26 is declared a day of thanks for the victory over the French at Ft. Duquesne, Pa.
 - 1759**—Autumn witnesses celebrations of thanks for the victory over the French at Quebec. Colonies from New Hampshire to Georgia participate.
- 1774:** Massachusetts declares the first American (not by British authority) day of thanks for Dec. 15.
- 1775-83: REVOLUTIONARY WAR**

1775, Nov. 23—Continental Army besieged in Boston observes a day of thanks.

1777: *Battle of Saratoga* (Oct. 17).

Dec. 18—Continental Congress proclaims this first *national* day of thanks “for the support of our troops, and to crown our arms with most signal success.” (Gen. George Washington does likewise.) First such celebration ever proclaimed by a national authority for all 13 states.

1781: *Battle of Yorktown* (Oct. 19).

Dec. 13—Congress authorizes this day of thanks for the victory over the British in Virginia.

1782, Nov. 28—13 states celebrate, grateful for the peace ending the Revolutionary War.

1783, Dec. 11—Continental Congress declares a day of thanks for peace.

1789, Oct. 3—President George Washington proclaims *Nov. 26* the first day of thanks designated by the national government.

1798-99: QUASI-NAVAL WAR WITH FRANCE

President John Adams proclaims a day of thanks both of these years.

1812-15: WAR OF 1812

Congress requests President James Madison to set aside as days of fasting and prayer: Aug. 20, 1812; Sept. 9, 1813; and Jan. 12, 1815.

1815, April 13—Madison proclaims as a day of thanks for the victory over the British at the Battle of New Orleans (Jan. 8).

1861-65: CIVIL WAR

1861, Nov. 24—Union forces gain ground at Fort Pulaski, Ga.

1862, April 13—Federal government proclaims a special day of thanks in gratitude of victory on the battlefield (Shiloh in Mississippi, for example.)

1863, Aug. 6—President Lincoln proclaims as a national day of thanks for the Union victory at Gettysburg, Pa. (July 1-3).

Oct. 3—Lincoln proclaims a nationwide Thanksgiving Day for the last Thursday of November for a “year filled with the blessings of fruitful fields and healthful skies.” Thanksgiving is observed annually hereafter.

Nov. 23-25—*Chattanooga Campaign*: Battles of Orchard Knob (Nov. 23), Lookout Mountain/The Battle Above the Clouds (Nov. 24) and Missionary Ridge (Nov. 25). 56,359 Union vs. 64,165 Confederate troops. 5,824 (753 KIA) Union casualties vs. 6,667 (361 KIA) Confederate.

1864, Nov. 24—Lincoln proclaims as Thanksgiving Day.

Nov. 17-30—*Battle of Franklin* is waged in Tennessee.

Nov. 24—Columbia, Tenn., scene of fighting.

Nov. 24—Union Army of the Potomac receives 59,000 pounds of turkey; Gen. Phil Sheridan’s troops receive 35,000 pounds of turkey for Thanksgiving.

Nov. 25—*Battle of Sandersville, Ga.*, causes 100 casualties on each side. *Siege of Petersburg* (10 months) in Virginia encompasses Thanksgiving.



French & Indian War: Battle of Quebec, 1759
“THE DEATH OF GENERAL WOLFE” BY BENJAMIN WEST / NATIONAL GALLERY OF CANADA, OTTAWA.



Revolutionary War: Battle of Saratoga, 1777
“SURRENDER OF GENERAL BURGOYNE” BY JOHN TRUMBULL / U.S. ARCHITECT OF THE CAPITOL



War of 1812: Battle of New Orleans, 1815
“BATTLE OF NEW ORLEANS” BY DENNIS M. CARTER / WILLIAMS RESEARCH CENTER OF THE HISTORIC NEW ORLEANS COLLECTION



Lincoln proclaiming Thanksgiving Day in November 1864

“UNITED WE STAND” BY THOMAS NAST / HARPER’S WEEKLY, DEC. 3, 1864



Indian Wars: Soldiers on the Western frontier sometimes had to enjoy their turkey dinners at lonely campfires.
 "CAUSE FOR THANKSGIVING," BY GILBERT GAUL, HARPER'S WEEKLY, 1887

1861-91: TRANS-MISSISSIPPI INDIAN CAMPAIGNS

1864, Nov. 25—*First Battle of Adobe Walls*. Near present-day Borger, Texas, 335 men under Col. "Kit" Carson fight at least 1,000 Comanches and Kiowas in one of the largest battles of the Indian War. 3 soldiers and 1 scout are KIA vs. 60 Indians killed.

1876, Nov. 25—*Battle of the Red Forks of the Powder River*. 1,100 cavalymen fight 400 Cheyenne warriors. 6 KIA and 26 WIA vs. 40 Indians killed.

1880: Gen. George Crook makes a ritual of the turkey hunt in Arizona. Over two days in November, he and his men bag some 100 turkeys around Fort Apache in hostile territory.

1917-18: WORLD WAR I

1917, Nov. 20-Dec. 4—*Battle of Cambrai*. U.S. railway engineers participate in this offensive in France. It is the first successful use of tanks in a combined arms operation.

Throughout France, specially detailed officers scour the countryside for two weeks before Thanksgiving in search of turkeys for dinner.

1941-45: WORLD WAR II

1941, Nov. 26—President Franklin Roosevelt signs a bill establishing the fourth Thursday in November as Thanksgiving Day. The federal law is 55 Stat. 862 (1941).

1942

Nov. 17—*Tunisia Campaign* (start). North Africa. U.S. battles are fought at Tebourba and Chouigui in November.

Nov. 19—*Battle of Buna* (start). New Guinea. U.S. 32nd and 41st IDs (163rd IR) are committed to battle with a total of 14,464 troops. 787 KIA and 1,918 WIA. Many other GIs die of disease.

1943

Nov. 20-23—*Battle of Makin*. Gilbert Islands. 165th RCT and 105th Regt. of 27th ID secure island. U.S.=218 KIA.

Nov. 20-28—*Battle of Tarawa*. Gilbert Islands. Secure after 8 days of brutal combat. Marines=1,085 KIA; 2,292 WIA. Navy=727 KIA.

Nov. 24—*USS Liscome Bay* is sunk off Tarawa by a Japanese torpedo, losing 646 KIA.

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Civil War: Battle of Lookout Mountain, 1863

"BATTLE OF LOOKOUT MOUNTAIN" BY KURZ & ALLISON / LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



WWI: Battle of Cambrai, France, 1917

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WWII: Battle of Tarawa, 1943
 U.S. NAVY PHOTO

Nov. 25—*Battle of Cape St. George*. Solomons. Last naval battle in that island chain. The five-ship Destroyer Squadron 23 destroys several Japanese ships.

Nov. 26—*SS Rohna* is sunk by a German guided missile in the Mediterranean Sea. 1,015 U.S. troops die aboard the British troopship.

1944

November—*Battle of Leyte*. Philippines. Fighting fierce through Thanksgiving. U.S. troop strength peaks at 254,000 on the island.

Nov. 2-Dec. 15—*Battle of Huertgen Forest*. Germany. 120,000 U.S. troops sustain 24,000 battle casualties plus 5,000 losses due to disease.

Nov. 25—*Battle of Peleliu* (ends). Palau Islands. Marines=1,336 KIA; 6,032 WIA. Navy=195 KIA; 505 WIA. Army 81st ID=110 KIA; 717 WIA.

1950-53: KOREAN WAR

1950, Nov. 25-29—*Battle of the Chosin Reservoir*. The encircled 1st Marine Division fights its way southward to the Hungnam Perimeter, backed by the 3rd and 7th Infantry divisions. U.S.=1,225 KIA; 4,380 WIA.

1965-72: VIETNAM WAR (U.S. ground combat phase)

1967, Nov. 22—*Battle of Dak To* (ends). After 19 days of battle, the 173rd Abn. Bde. and elements of the 4th Inf. Div. fight off 6,000 North Vietnamese. U.S.=192 KIA; 642 WIA.

2003-09: IRAQ WAR

2004, Nov. 8-25—*Battle of Fallujah*. *Operation Phantom Fury* employs 10,000 U.S. troops in clearing this city over 17 days. U.S.=71 KIA; 609 WIA.



WWII: Battle of Huertgen Forest, Germany, 1944

"HUERTGEN FOREST" PAINTING BY JIM DIETZ



Korean War: Battle of the Chosin Reservoir, 1950

U.S. MARINE CORPS PHOTO



Vietnam War: Battle of Dak To, 1967

U.S. ARMY PHOTO



Iraq War: Battle of Fallujah, 2004

U.S. MARINE CORPS PHOTO