

# Why is Thanksgiving on the fourth Thursday of November?

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Nearly 170 years after the Pilgrims and the Wampanoag tribe celebrated the first Thanksgiving together in 1621, the United States government decided to make the day official. So on October 3, 1789, President George Washington declared that the nation would observe a 'public day of thanksgiving' on November 26 of that year.

Although November 26, 1789, happened to fall on a Thursday, subsequent proclamations did not standardize the practice—according to the National Archives, other presidents chose different days and even months for the food-filled harvest holiday. Then, in 1863, President Abraham Lincoln issued a proclamation that Thanksgiving would be celebrated annually on the last Thursday in November.

While we don't know exactly why Washington originally chose Thursday, there are a few theories. The Old Farmer's Almanac suggests that Thursday became an early tradition because it was just far enough from the weekend to avoid clashing with the Sabbath. New England ministers also often preached on Thursday afternoons, so it's possible that the prayerful, reflective nature of Thanksgiving was closely tied to the regularly scheduled devotional program.

Regardless, the nation gave thanks around the dinner table every last Thursday in November until 1939, when Thanksgiving fell on the very last day of November. With the country still mired in the Great Depression, President Franklin D. Roosevelt decided that the economy would benefit if Thanksgiving were celebrated a week earlier, thus extending the holiday shopping season (and retailers encouraged Franklin to move it to this date).

In a presidential proclamation, he moved it to the last Thursday in November, but only 32 states agreed—so from 1939 to 1941, America had two Thanksgivings, depending on where you lived.

In 1941, Congress ended the chaos with a joint resolution declaring that the entire nation would celebrate Thanksgiving on just one day. Although the House of Representatives originally chose the last Thursday, they eventually relented when the Senate introduced an amendment that chose the fourth Thursday instead. President Roosevelt signed it into law on December 26, 1941.

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