



Home / Topics / Thanksgiving / [Thanksgiving: Fact or Fiction](#)

Thanksgiving: Fact or Fiction

BY: HISTORY.COM EDITORS

UPDATED: NOVEMBER 19, 2024 | ORIGINAL: JANUARY 6, 2010

“The reason that we have so many myths associated with Thanksgiving is that it is an invented tradition. It doesn’t originate in any one event. It is based on the New England puritan Thanksgiving, which is a religious Thanksgiving, and the traditional harvest celebrations of England and New England and maybe other ideas like commemorating the pilgrims. All of these have been gathered together and transformed into something different from the original parts.”—James W. Baker, Senior Historian at Plimoth Plantation.

1. Fact or Fiction: Thanksgiving is held on the final Thursday of November each year.

Fiction. In 1863, President [Abraham Lincoln designated the last Thursday in November](#) as a national day of thanksgiving. However, in 1939, after a request from the National Retail Dry Goods Association, President Franklin Roosevelt decreed that the holiday should always be celebrated on the fourth Thursday of the month (and never the occasional fifth, as occurred in 1939) in order to extend the holiday shopping season by a week. The decision sparked great controversy, and was still unresolved two years later, when the [House of Representatives](#) passed a resolution making the last Thursday in November a legal national holiday. The Senate amended the resolution, setting the date as the fourth Thursday, and the House eventually agreed.

2. Fact or Fiction: One of America's Founding Fathers thought the turkey should be the national bird of the United States.

Fact. In a letter to his daughter sent in 1784, [Benjamin Franklin](#) suggested that the wild turkey would be a more appropriate national symbol for the newly independent United States than the bald eagle (which had earlier been chosen by the Continental Congress). He argued that the turkey was “a much more respectable Bird,” “a true original Native of America,” and “though a little vain and silly, a Bird of Courage.”

3. Fact or Fiction: In 1863, Abraham Lincoln became the first American president to proclaim a national day of thanksgiving.

Fiction. [George Washington](#), [John Adams](#) and [James Madison](#) all issued proclamations urging Americans to observe days of thanksgiving, both for general good fortune and for particularly momentous events (the adoption of the U.S. [Constitution](#), in Washington's case; the end of the [War of 1812](#), in Madison's).

4. Fact or Fiction: Macy's was the first American department store to sponsor a parade in celebration of Thanksgiving.

Fiction. The Philadelphia department store Gimbels had sponsored a parade in 1920, but the Macy's parade, launched four years later, soon became a Thanksgiving tradition and the standard kickoff to the holiday shopping season. The parade became ever more well-known after it featured prominently in the hit film *Miracle on 34th Street* (1947), which shows actual footage of the 1946 parade. In addition to its famous giant balloons and floats, the Macy's parade features live music and other

performances, including by the Radio City Music Hall Rockettes and cast members of well-known Broadway shows.

5. Fact or Fiction: Turkeys are slow-moving birds that lack the ability to fly.

Fiction (kind of). Domesticated turkeys (the type eaten on Thanksgiving) cannot fly, and their pace is limited to a slow walk. Female domestic turkeys, which are typically smaller and lighter than males, can move somewhat faster. Wild turkeys, on the other hand, are much smaller and more agile. They can reach speeds of up to 20-25 miles per hour on the ground and fly for short distances at speeds approaching 55 miles per hour. They also have better eyesight and hearing than their domestic counterparts.

6. Fact or Fiction: Native Americans used cranberries, now a staple of many Thanksgiving dinners, for cooking as well as medicinal purposes.

Fact. According to the Cape Cod Cranberry Growers' Association, one of the country's oldest farmers' organizations, Native Americans used cranberries in a variety of foods, including "pemmican" (a nourishing, high-protein combination of crushed berries, dried deer meat and melted fat). They also used it as a medicine to treat arrow punctures and other wounds and as a dye for fabric. [The Pilgrims](#) adopted these uses for the fruit and gave it a name—"cranberry"—because its drooping pink blossoms in the spring reminded them of a crane.

7. Fact or Fiction: The movement of the turkey inspired a ballroom dance.

Fact. The turkey trot, modeled on that bird's characteristic short, jerky steps, was one of a number of popular dance styles that emerged during the late 19th and early 20th century in the United States. The two-step, a simple dance that required little to no

instruction, was quickly followed by such dances as the one-step, the turkey trot, the fox trot and the bunny hug, which could all be performed to the ragtime and jazz music popular at the time. The popularity of such dances spread like wildfire, helped along by the teachings and performances of exhibition dancers like the famous husband-and-wife team Vernon and Irene Castle.

8. Fact or Fiction: On Thanksgiving Day in 2007, two turkeys earned a trip to Disney World.

Fact. On November 20, 2007, President [George W. Bush](#) granted a “pardon” to two turkeys, named May and Flower, at the 60th annual National Thanksgiving Turkey presentation, held in the Rose Garden at the [White House](#). The two turkeys were flown to Orlando, [Florida](#), where they served as honorary grand marshals for the Disney World Thanksgiving Parade. The current tradition of presidential turkey pardons began in 1947, under [Harry Truman](#), but the practice is said to have informally begun with Abraham Lincoln, who granted a pardon to his son Tad’s pet turkey.

9. Fact or Fiction: Turkey contains an amino acid that makes you sleepy.

Fact. Turkey does contain the essential amino acid tryptophan, which is a natural sedative, but so do a lot of other foods, including chicken, beef, pork, beans and cheese. Though many people believe turkey’s tryptophan content is what makes many people feel sleepy after a big Thanksgiving meal, it is more likely the combination of fats and carbohydrates most people eat with the turkey, as well as the large amount of food (not to mention alcohol, in some cases) consumed, that makes most people feel like following their meal up with a nap.

10. Fact or Fiction: The tradition of playing or watching football on Thanksgiving

started with the first National Football League game on the holiday in 1934.

Fiction. The American tradition of [college football on Thanksgiving](#) is pretty much as old as the sport itself. The newly formed American Intercollegiate Football Association held its first championship game on Thanksgiving Day in 1876. At the time, the sport resembled something between rugby and what we think of as football today. By the 1890s, more than 5,000 club, college and high school football games were taking place on Thanksgiving, and championship match-ups between schools like Princeton and Yale could draw up to 40,000 fans.

The NFL took up the tradition in 1934, when the Detroit Lions (recently arrived in the city and renamed) played the Chicago Bears at the University of Detroit stadium in front of 26,000 fans. Since then, the Lions game on Thanksgiving has become an annual event, taking place every year except during the [World War II](#) years (1939–1944).

BY: [HISTORY.COM EDITORS](#)

[HISTORY.com](#) works with a wide range of writers and editors to create accurate and informative content. All articles are regularly reviewed and updated by the HISTORY.com team. Articles with the “HISTORY.com Editors” byline have been written or edited by the HISTORY.com editors, including [Amanda Onion](#), [Missy Sullivan](#), [Matt Mullen](#) and Christian Zapata.

Citation Information

Article Title Thanksgiving: Fact or Fiction

Author [History.com Editors](#)

Website Name HISTORY

URL <https://www.history.com/topics/thanksgiving/thanksgiving-quiz>

Date Accessed December 2, 2024

Publisher A&E Television Networks