

FEATURE

Religious focus declined as Thanksgiving evolved

By Nancy Hartnagel
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — Long before parades, football games or commercial turkey farms, Thanksgiving had a religious focus.

In 1621, 50 Pilgrim immigrants and 90 Wampanoag Native Americans gathered for three days to celebrate the peace and the harvest.

Alan Rogers, an associate professor of history at Boston College, said the first Thanksgiving certainly was a religious holiday "in the sense that they were a quite religious people, having braved that storm-tossed Atlantic to come here in order to be able to worship."

"But it was also simply a fall phenomenon," he said. "The harvest was in and they were grateful for the fact that they had food to put on the table."

Rogers, whose expertise is early American history, said the Pilgrims wanted to thank God for their survival "at the end of this rather arduous period when they were struggling to get the colony under way."

But because the Indians were invited, he said, the event "took on an additional aim of establishing a peaceful relationship. While that's certainly not contrary to Christianity, it does suggest that there was a kind of dual purpose."

Rogers said days of thanksgiving were

The *Catholic Courier* went to press early this week so this issue could be delivered before Thanksgiving. As a result, Bishop Clark's column does not appear. It will return next week.

quite common in 17th-century New England. More than 20 were proclaimed to mark a bountiful harvest or victory over the Indians, or "if the clergy believed that it was necessary for the people to profess their love of God in some way in order to avoid a catastrophe."

The first thanksgiving in the Massachusetts Bay Colony occurred in February 1630, he noted, when colonists gave thanks for the arrival of a provision ship without which they would have struggled.

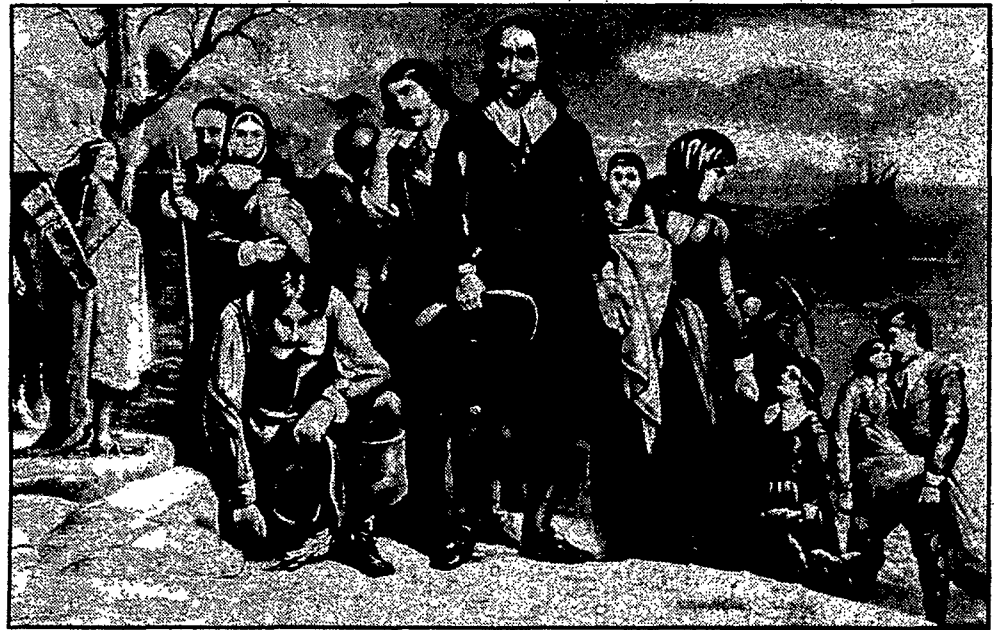
Rogers said it was after King Philip's War in 1675-76 that it became standard practice in New England to celebrate a fall feast on a Thursday in November. The choice of Thursday had religious significance, he added, "because Thursday was traditionally the so-called lecture day," the other day besides Sunday when many New Englanders attended Congregational services.

"After the prayer, after the lecture at the church, people would go home and have the big feast," said Rogers. The day was treated as a religious holiday or Sabbath, he said, with no one, including farmers at the plow, allowed to work and fines for people who violated that rule.

The Continental Congress declared national days of thanksgiving to God in 1779, 1781 and 1782. And in 1789, President George Washington issued a proclamation asking citizens of the new nation to observe a day of public thanksgiving and prayer.

But, from about 1815 to the Civil War, "there wasn't really an official Thanksgiving celebration," said Katherine Sibley, associate professor of history at Jesuit-run St. Joseph's University in Philadelphia.

In the 1840s, Sarah Josepha Hale, editor of Godey's Ladies Book and a proponent of



CNS photo courtesy Library of Congress

A Currier and Ives illustration depicts the Pilgrims' December 1620 landing at Plymouth. At the first Thanksgiving the following year, Pilgrims and Indians gathered together to celebrate a good harvest.

"the cult of domesticity," began to push for a national Thanksgiving holiday, said Sibley, who specializes in U.S. diplomatic history and women's history.

"She saw Thanksgiving as fitting into this whole emphasis on the family gathering, where it's seen as a way to bring back the simplicity of days gone by, emphasize the importance of the home, bring people together to be grateful for the fact that they had this domestic haven they could be in."

In 1863, with the Civil War raging, President Abraham Lincoln proclaimed the last Thursday of November the national Thanksgiving holiday.

Sibley said the holiday became an image of Americanization during World War I, after Jenny Browncombe produced a famous painting, "The First Thanksgiving," in 1914.

As the 20th century progressed, Thanksgiving became more secular. During the

Depression, U.S. retailers lobbied to mark Thanksgiving earlier in November to extend the Christmas shopping season.

Experimentation with the date followed. But after confusion in 1939 and 1940, when two Thanksgiving Days were celebrated, Thanksgiving was fixed in law in 1941 as the fourth Thursday in November.

Rogers said the holiday has changed with the nation. "Just as we are now a more secular nation than we were in 1630," he said, "so the holiday has come to focus almost exclusively on the food."

Sibley said that the religious significance of Thanksgiving may not be as broadly emphasized today, but "the image of fixing Thanksgiving in fellowship is clear."

"There's definitely a spiritual feeling that comes out at that time," she said, "the idea of helping others, the idea of being grateful for what one has received and then giving back."

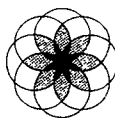
MOST SENIOR COMMUNITIES
TELL YOU TO BRING YOUR POSSESSIONS.



We ask you to bring your lifestyle.

You've got your own independent way of living. At The Heritage, we want you to bring it. Like to sleep late? We'll see you at lunch. Like to do your own shopping? You'll find everything from juice to birthday cards at our on-site convenience store. You can also visit our hair salon, attend daily mass, even see a doctor without ever leaving campus. And when the outside world calls, take one of our many field trips. The choice is yours. Kind of like everything else here. To learn more about

The Heritage, call 342-1700 or visit www.stannscommunity.com.



S. T. ANN'S
THE HERITAGE
Full of Life