

Column

One of my memories of the first grade was a teacher putting up a Thanksgiving bulletin board in the school lunch room. There were of course pilgrims, Indians and tables of food in her display.

Oddly enough my memory includes something else. This teacher had cellophane tape dangling from each of her fingers on one hand. I have no idea why this caught my attention and has remained with me, but it did. Regardless, this colourful display contributed to my understanding of the 'first' Thanksgiving held in 1621 in Plymouth, Mass. It was not until I was grown that I discovered that this claim is disputed.

Virginians, as I was later to learn, claim this honour for their commonwealth or state. With good historical evidence, they stoutly maintain that the first Thanksgiving occurred Dec. 4, 1619. It took place after the Good Ship Margaret landed with 35 hearty souls who had set sail two and half months earlier from Bristol, England.

The location was 30 miles west of Jamestown on the James River where the Virginia Company had been given 8000 acres by King James. There was no feasting with friendly Indians that day. Rather, Captain John Woodlief conducted a religious service of thanksgiving in which he said:

“We ordaine [sic] that this day of our ship’s arrival, at the place assigned for plantacon [sic], in the land of Virginia, shall be yearly and perpetually kept holy as a day of Thanksgiving to Almighty God.”

A service of thanksgiving continued to be held on the anniversary of this landing until 1622, only to be revived in 1958. A re-enactment of this first Thanksgiving observance has been held on the Berkeley Plantation ever since.

The rivalry between Massachusetts and Virginia gained national attention in 1962 when Virginia State Senator John J. Wicker sent President John F. Kennedy a telegram taking issue with his thanksgiving proclamation. In it the President gave full credit for Thanksgiving to the pilgrims in Massachusetts.

The following year – 18 days before his untimely death in Dallas – President Kennedy put the matter to rest when, in an act of great diplomacy, he wrote in his annual proclamation: “Over three centuries ago, our forefathers in Virginia and Massachusetts, far from home, in a lonely wilderness set aside a time of Thanksgiving.

Regardless of with whom or where this observance began, the words of the Psalmist remain true for individuals and nations: “It is a good thing to give thanks unto the Lord, and to sing praises unto thy name, O Most High.” In that spirit, let us keep the feast!

Almighty God, who hast given us this good land for our heritage; We humbly beseech thee that we may always prove ourselves a people mindful of thy favour and glad to do thy will. Bless our land with honourable industry, sound learning, and pure manners. Save us from violence, discord, and confusion; from pride and arrogancy, and from every evil way. Defend our liberties, and fashion into one united people the multitudes brought hither out of many kindreds and tongues. Endue with the spirit of wisdom those to whom in thy Name we entrust the authority of government, that there may be justice and peace at home, and that, through obedience to thy law, we may show forth thy praise among the nations of the earth. In the time of prosperity, fill our hearts with thankfulness, and in the day of trouble, suffer not our trust in thee to fail; all which we ask through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The Rev. Victor H. Morgan is rector of St. Luke’s Episcopal Church, Blue Ridge.