

Alexandria Times

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Alexandria and Thanksgiving

Longtime readers of this column will remember that Southern colonies and states did not celebrate Thanksgiving regularly until after the Civil War. Unlike Halloween, which Maryland and the southern states celebrated regularly, many Virginians considered Thanksgiving a New England tradition not applicable to their location.

Perhaps since both celebrated the autumn harvest, Halloween and Thanksgiving were seen as competitors, rather than compliments. Despite the first Thanksgiving being celebrated in 1619 in Virginia, a full year before the Separatists arrived at Plymouth Rock, our state did not regularly observe the holiday.

While Virginia didn't celebrate Thanksgiving, Alexandria did in 1819 and 1820, according to the Alexandria Herald. In 1819, Mayor Jacob Hoffman declared "That the said seventh of October be religiously observed as a day of Thanksgiving and prayer."

In 1820, other southern locations such as Charleston and the state of Georgia similarly celebrated a day of religious thanksgiving in October. The Phenix Gazette noted in 1832 that various localities used different dates to observe a day of Thanksgiving. Maine celebrated the holiday on Dec.



PHOTO/FAHRWASSER VIA ADOBE STOCK

Alexandria celebrated Thanksgiving in 1819 and 1820, unlike other Southern cities.

2 that year, while Rhode Island and New Hampshire chose Nov. 25. In contrast, Gov. Trumble of Ohio declared Nov. 18 a state holiday.

In 1835, the editor of the Alexandria Gazette suggested that the reason New England celebrated the holiday and not Virginia was, "the peculiar spirit and character of its people and that with us, the day would not possess its proper efficacy." Others suggested that the lack of a state holiday reflected poorly on Virginia's piety.

As the debate over Thanks-

giving continued into the 1850s, readers of the Alexandria Gazette expressed opposition to its official celebration. One letter to the editor, published on Nov. 15, 1858, claimed that during the last city holiday, "On my way to church, I saw open and bold dissipation, as if the day gave license to it."

The writer insisted, "whilst I am opposed to a day of thanksgiving, I am not opposed to thanksgiving days, but think that every day that we live should be one." One editorial in the Alexandria Ga-

zette claimed to represent the turkeys of Virginia, who overwhelmingly voted against adopting the holiday within the Commonwealth.

Abraham Lincoln established the annual observance of Thanksgiving in the United States in 1863, and the holiday was celebrated in Alexandria during the Civil War since the city was under Union occupation. Alexandria has celebrated the holiday each year since.

Out of the Attic is provided by the Office of Historic Alexandria.