

HISTORIC ROOTS

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THANKSGIVING IN WOODSTOCK, 1890

By DAVID DONATH

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The Reverend Moses Kidder was up early that Thanksgiving morning. He was going over the notes for the sermon he would give in church later on. C. H. Kidder slept a bit later. His part in the holiday had been finished the week before when he had put almost 20,000 pounds of live poultry on the train to Boston, where it would be sold at market. He had received a good price for the birds. Eggs were also selling well. Thirty cents a dozen was a much higher price than at other times of year. The holiday was good for business.

Families on the farms around Woodstock milked their cows, fed the animals, cleaned out the barns. Adults and children, men and women, family and hired hands all pitched in. Every day, holiday or not, the chores had to be done. But on holidays most of the extra work fell to the women and girls.

On Frederick Billings' farm, manager George Aitken and his wife, Margaret, woke up well before dawn, just as they did every day. Margaret made breakfast. Then she and her



John Gilbert Fox

At the Billings Farm & Museum you can see people preparing food the way they did in 1890.

four daughters went to work preparing the Thanksgiving dinner.

George went across the yard to the cow barns where his men had already begun the morning milking. They would all have time off today, to go to church and be with their families. Then, in the late afternoon, they would come back to the barn for afternoon milking and chores.

In 1890 Thanksgiving had been a national holiday for less than 30 years. But New England farmers had celebrated much longer. They did so because they were grateful for good harvests and because they remembered the Pilgrims' celebration in 1621. Then, after a time of starvation and sickness, the Pilgrims and their Wampanoag neighbors had given thanks for the harvest and their own survival.

Abraham Lincoln established Thanksgiving as a national holiday in 1863, in the middle of the Civil War. The long and bloody war was to last until 1865. But in 1863, after the important battles of Vicksburg and Gettysburg, the Union forces began to see victory ahead.

It was men's pride that had caused the evils of the war, Lincoln said. He set aside the last Thursday in November as a day to remember the blessings God had given and to give thanks for them.

Farmers in Woodstock in 1890 knew they had a lot to be thankful for. They hoped that if



Courtesy of the Woodstock Historical Society

George and Margaret Aitken and their four daughters in front of the farm house in 1892. The older woman in the middle may be the girls' grandmother.

they worked hard and well the land would provide a living for themselves, and for their children and grandchildren in the future. They also knew that hard work wasn't enough. Too much or too little rain could ruin crops. So could frosts that came too late or too early. So

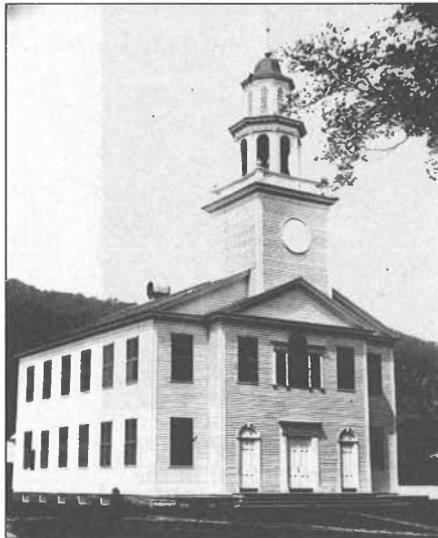
could insects and blights.¹ Vermont's cold climate and rocky soil made it even harder for farmers to succeed. They believed it was God's goodness as well as their own hard work that had given them a fine harvest and shelter and good health. A day to thank God for all of life's blessings was something they understood.

On Thanksgiving morning in 1890 the Aitkens went to church with their four children. When they went home they sat down to dinner. The table was covered with the food that Margaret and the girls had prepared. There was turkey, raised on the farm, and oysters, brought in on the train from Boston. There were potatoes, vegetables, and fruit. Dessert included pumpkin pie and homemade ice cream. Everyone gave thanks again.

And then they ate.

After the meal, the adults sat and talked. The older girls played the piano and their

¹ A blight is a plant disease.



Courtesy of the Woodstock Historical Society

The Woodstock Congregational Church as it looked in 1890 when the Aitken family went there.

younger sisters went outside. They all enjoyed the chance to relax. By mid-afternoon the holiday was over. George joined the men in the barn. Margaret and the girls went back to the kitchen. Farm life does not stop for holidays.

The Aitken farm house still exists in Woodstock as part of the Billings Farm & Museum. The farm is still a working farm. The house looks the way it did when the Aitkens lived there. In it are things like those the Aitkens owned and used. People there explain and show what life was like in that house and on that farm. To visit the Billings Farm & Museum is to see the past come to life. It is a past that is different from today, but maybe not so different as you might think.

Rooting Around

The Billings Farm & Museum is on Route 12 in Woodstock. The farmhouse is decorated for Christmas and is open on December weekends and from December 26-31. The whole farm and museum are open every day from May 1-October 31. Call 802-457-2355 for more information and directions.

How do you celebrate Thanksgiving? Is it different from what you did when you were growing up? You might want to compare your celebration with your friends'. How are they the same? How do they differ?