

Yesterday in U.S. Stamp News: **Our Fluid Thanksgiving Schedule**

By Alan Glennon

(From *U.S. Stamp News*, October 2002. Because the article references specific covers and we only have them in black and white, we are incorporating them into the article while also adding new, color images. JFD.)

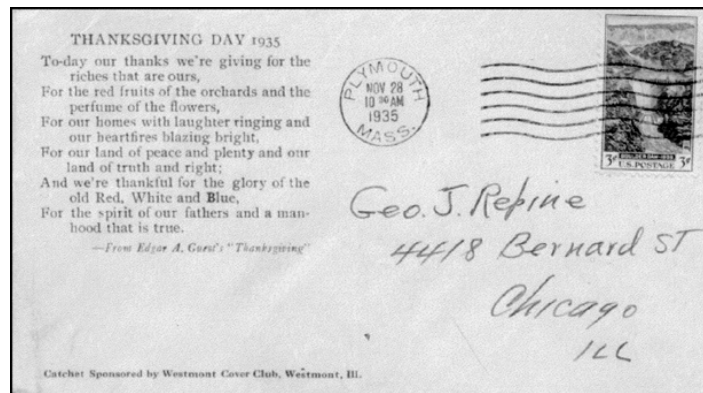


Figure 1. Plymouth, Mass., Nov. 28, 1935

From a Plymouth, Mass., 1935 Cachet (Figure 1):

Thanksgiving Day 1935

*Today our thanks we're giving for the riches that are ours,
For the red fruits of the orchards and the perfume of the flowers,
For our homes with laughter ringing and our heartfires blazing bright,
For our land of peace and plenty and our land of truth and right;
And we're thankful for the glory of the old Red, White and Blue,
For the spirit of our fathers and a manhood that is true.*

– From Edgar A. Guest's "Thanksgiving"

* * * * *

Harvest festivals, annual celebrations of the abundance of crops, have a long history in many parts of the world. According to tradition, our American Thanksgiving Day originated in 1621, when the Pilgrim settlers invited their Indian neighbors to share in the bountiful harvest, in a three-day celebration. As it turns out, this "first Thanks-

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giving” was not the basis for an annual feast. Although other days of thanksgiving were proclaimed from time to time, the 1621 celebration was forgotten until the early 19th century, when reference to it was discovered in a 1622 book referred to as “Mourt’s Relation” (A relation or journal of the beginning of proceedings of the English plantation settled at Plimoth in New England).

In the meantime, days of thanksgiving were proclaimed from time to time for religious and secular reasons, not always associated with the harvest. During the Revolution and the Civil War, for example, days of thanksgiving were proclaimed after major battles. New York state established an annual Thanksgiving Day in 1817; other states followed in later years.

In 1863, Abraham Lincoln proclaimed the last Thursday in November as Thanksgiving Day, and Congress later made it a national holiday. As the custom became more widespread, Thanksgiving Day continued to be celebrated on the last Thursday in November.

In the early twentieth century, the day after Thanksgiving became the customary start of the Christmas shopping season, unlike today, when it seems to begin on Labor Day, or earlier. Gradually, the forces of commercialism exerted more and more influence on the holiday, exemplified by the annual parade sponsored by Macy’s Department store, which has been copied by other organizations in other cities. In a less commercialized aspect of the holiday, Thanksgiving also became a traditional day for football games.

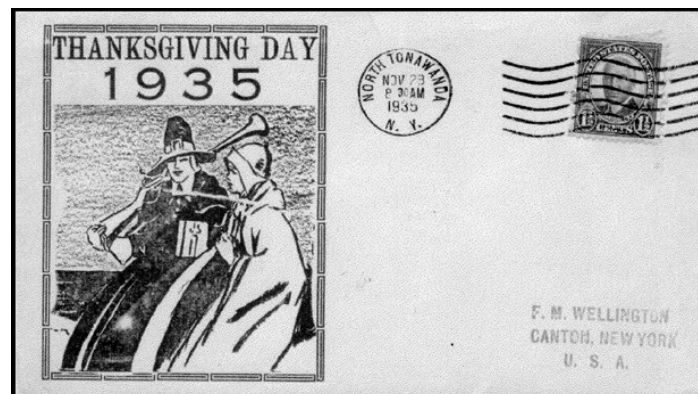


Figure 2. North Tonawanda, N.Y., Nov. 23, 1935

At some point, Thanksgiving Day became a subject for philatelic celebration, as well. At a recent bourse, one of the dealers had a selection of Thanksgiving Day covers, running from 1935, as shown in Figures 1 and 2 (pages 1 and 2), to 1948, Figure 3.

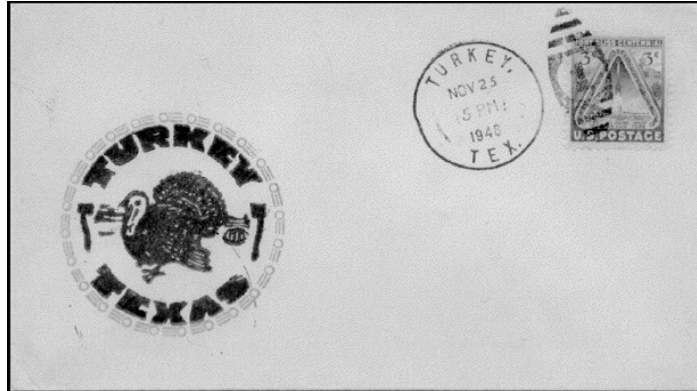


Figure 3. Turkey, Tex., Nov. 25, 1948

As I am not a student of Thanksgiving covers, I don't know how long before 1935 or how long after 1948 Thanksgiving covers were popular. Although it doesn't carry an overt Thanksgiving Day Cachet, the 1948 cover from Turkey, Texas (below), was cancelled on Thanksgiving Day and obviously commemorates the holiday.

Navy Mail Clerks, always on the alert for a reason for a special cancellation or cachet, were regular creators of Thanksgiving covers, such as Figure 4, a 1934 cover from USS Northampton.

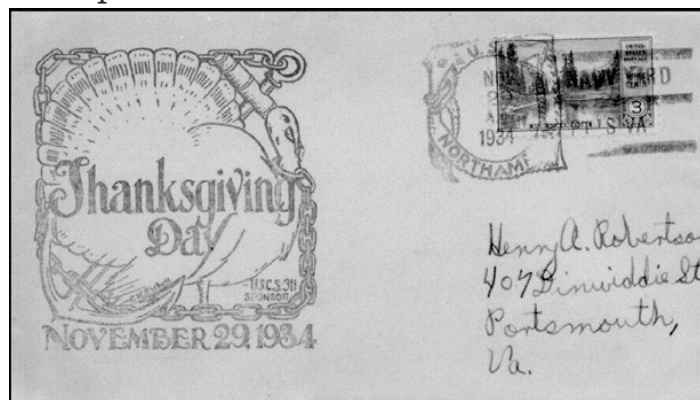


Figure 4. USS Northampton, Nov. 29, 1934

Despite our modern-day mythology, it should be noted that President Franklin D. Roosevelt was not exactly uni-

versally popular. In one of those actions that so angered his political opponents, the President issued a proclamation in 1939, changing the date of Thanksgiving from the last to the fourth Thursday in November. The stated purpose was to please the retail business community by extending the 1939 Christmas shopping season by a week. The intent in subsequent years was to continue to observe the holiday on the next-to-last Thursday of November. While this pleased the retail merchants associations, it created an uproar among the general public. This simple challenge to tradition created almost as much stir as his attempt to add justices to the Supreme Court so he could get rulings of “constitutional” on some of his more radical programs.

There may have been earlier indications of intent, but the first appearance in the New York Times was an article in the August 15, 1939, edition: “Roosevelt to shift (Thanksgiving) celebration date to November 23 to aid retail sales; shift opposed by Plymouth, Mass., and football schedule makers.” This was the first of dozens of articles and editorials on the subject, running through about December 1.

Although President Roosevelt’s actual proclamation was not issued until November 1, his announcement of intent precipitated a national controversy. As might be expected, the retail merchants supported the move wholeheartedly, while traditionalists objected. The state governors, whose proclamations would actually determine the date of the observance in their states, were split.

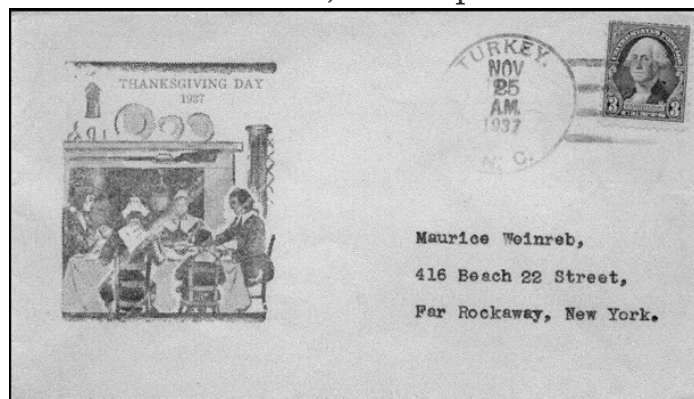


Figure 5. Turkey, N.C., Nov. 25, 1937

The impact of Roosevelt's change in Thanksgiving Day can be seen in the Thanksgiving cachets. Prior to 1939, they simply celebrate the occasion, often with a Pilgrim-themed cachet, as in Figure 5 (page 4).

For 1939, the cachets were mixed in support of or opposition to the new date. Figure 6, from Elizabeth, N.J., simply states the date, while Fernwood, N.Y. (Figure 7), and Kansas City, Mo. (Figure 8), refer to the President's proclamation.

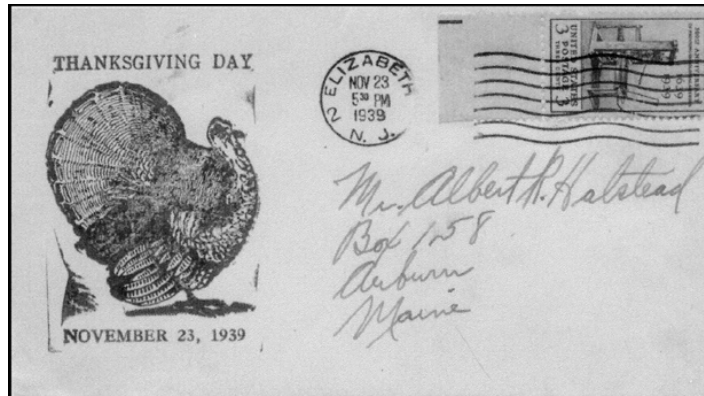


Figure 6.
Elizabeth, N.J.,
Nov. 23, 1939

Figure 7.
Fernwood, N.J.,
Nov. 23, 1939.
"Thanksgiving,
by Proclamation
of Pres.
Roosevelt"

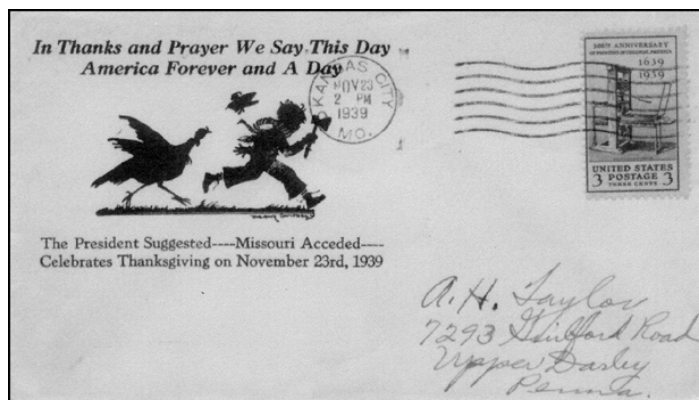
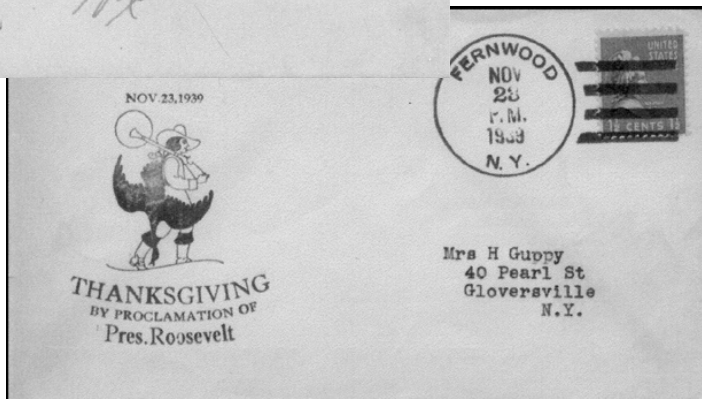


Figure 8. Kansas
City, Mo., Nov. 23,
1939. "The Presi-
dent Suggested--
-Missouri Acced-
ed---Celebrates
Thanksgiving on
November 23rd,
1939.

Colorado, Figures 9 and 10 (page 6), showed some ambivalence, seeming to accept the old and the new dates.

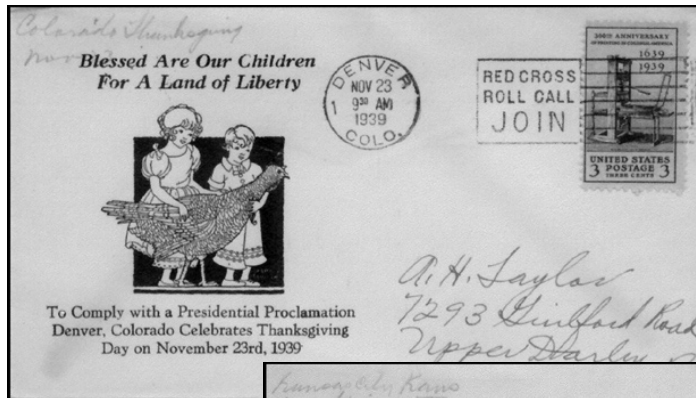


Figure 9. Denver, Colo., Nov. 23, 1939. "To Comply with a Presidential Proclamation Denver, Colorado Celebrates Thanksgiving Day on November 23rd 1939"

Figure 10. Denver, Colo., Nov. 30, 1939. "The President Suggested—Colorado Rejected—Celebrates Thanksgiving on November 30th, 1939"

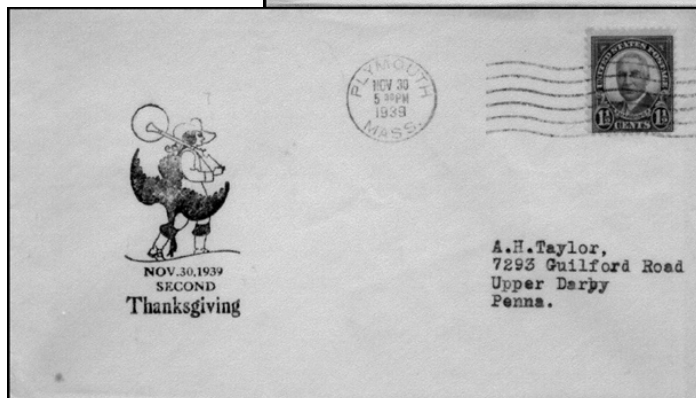
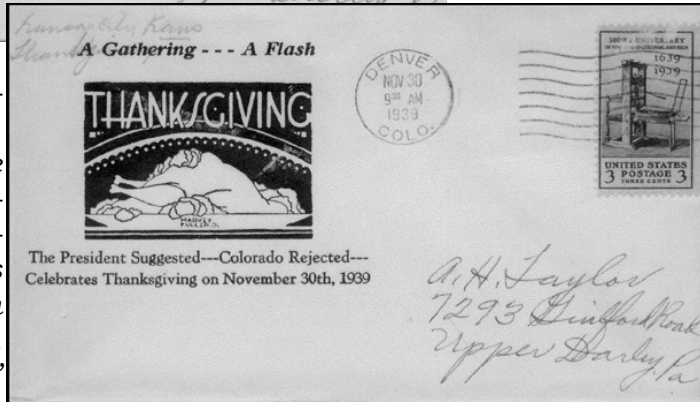


Figure 11. Plymouth, Mass, Nov. 30, 1939. "Nov. 30, 1939. Second Thanksgiving".

Plymouth, Mass., having been in the forefront of rejecters of the change, showed up with an enigmatic cachet, Figure 11, implying that the town may have observed both dates. The main figure of the cachet is the same as Fernwood, N.Y.'s in Figure 7.

Finally, Naugatuck, Conn., Figure 12 (page 7), simply celebrated their 300th anniversary of Thanksgiving, while Kansas City, Kans., Figure 13 (page 7), split with its Missouri sister city by staying with the traditional date.

By the next year, things had settled down somewhat. President Roosevelt again proclaimed Thanksgiving to be

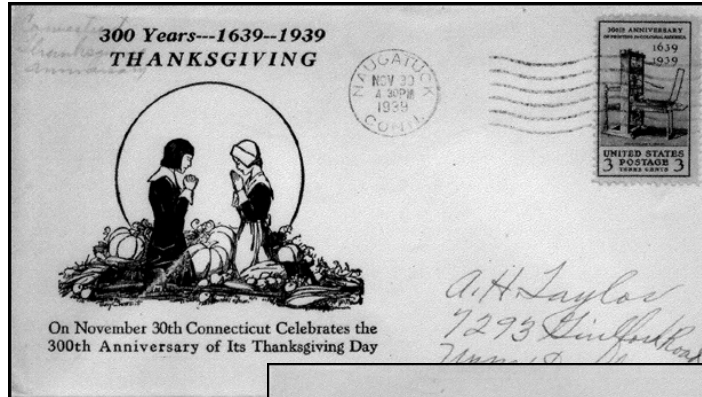
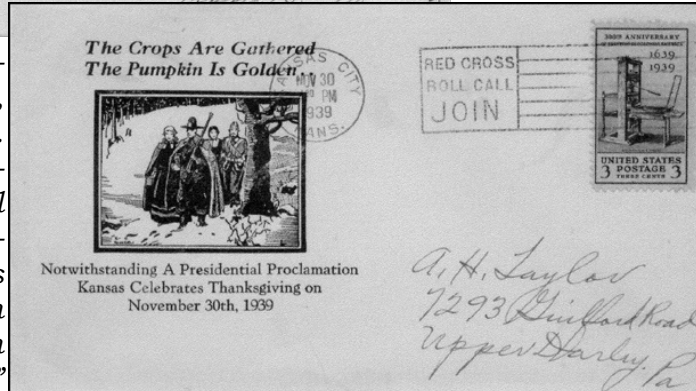


Figure 12. Naukatuck, Conn. "On November 30th Connecticut Celebrates the 300th Anniversary of Its Thanksgiving Day"

Figure 13. Kansas City, Kans., Nov. 30, 1939. "Notwithstanding A Presidential Proclamation Kansas Celebrates Thanksgiving on November 30th 1939"



the fourth Thursday in November. The merchants were still pleased, and the football schedulers had adequate time to adjust to the new date, so there was a little less discontent in the nation over the schedule.

Turkey, Tex, issued an attractive cachet, Figure 14, simply showing a turkey without hinting at any controversy over the date—but showing Thanksgiving as the third Thursday in November, i.e., the next-to-last Thursday.

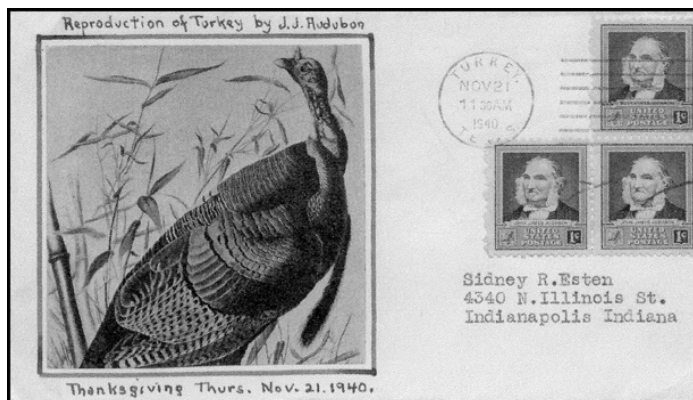


Figure 14. Turkey, Texas, Nov. 21, 1940

Finally, in 1941, after the President acknowledged he'd made a mistake with his next-to-last Thursday decrees,

Congress passed a joint resolution, accepting the fourth Thursday in November as the date to celebrate Thanksgiving. We don't even remember the controversy today.

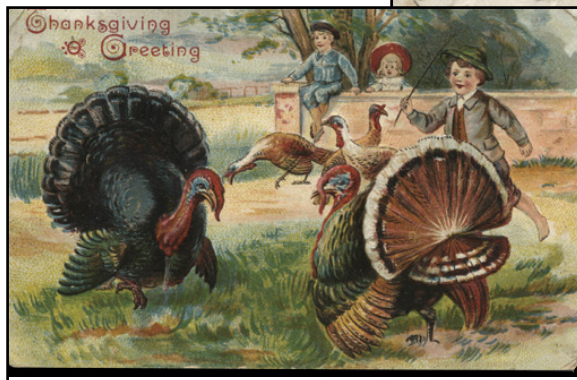
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3. "The Evolution of Thanksgiving", Pilgrim Hall Museum, <<http://www.pilgrimhallmuseum.org/>>
4. "Thanksgiving Day", Encyclopedia Britannica <<http://www.britannica.com>>
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Addendum

A Selection of Thanksgiving Covers

A 1900
picture post
card



Nov. 23, 1907 picture post card with Boston, Springfield & N.Y. Railway Post Office cancel



Last Thursday, November 30, 1933, from the USS Constitution



Three Fifth Thursday, November 29, 1934 cachets: top, from the U.S. Navy Zeppelin, Macon; center, from the USS Overton; bottom, from the USS Astoria.



The Astoria participated in World War II in the Battle of the Coral Sea and the Battle of Midway, but was sunk in August 1942 at the Battle of Savo Island.



November 28, 1935, on board the USS Pennsylvania



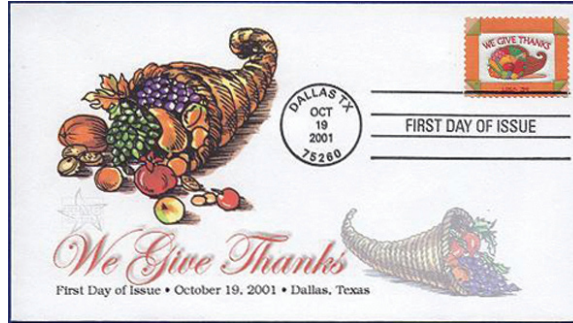
Fourth Thursdays from
Turkey Texas:
left, November 28, 1935;
below, November 25, 1936



November 24, 1938
on board the USS
Porpoise

An unused cacheted envelope prepared for use on the USS Ranger, with both Thanksgiving 1939 date options





Of more recent vintage, an October 19, 2001 First Day Cover for the Thanksgiving stamp, with an emphasis on the Thanksgiving feast



*A September 9, 2009 FDC with two of the four Thanksgiving Day Parade stamps, emphasizing two traditional Thanksgiving Day activities.
(All that's missing is Black Friday shopping.)*



Finally, what may be the ultimate Thanksgiving cover. This rare cover is known as the "Running Chicken" cover. The handiwork of Waterbury, Conn., postmaster John W. Hill, it most recently sold for \$240,000 in 1979; however, because the November 29 cancel date is so close to Thanksgiving some collectors believe those are Turkeys running from the axe!

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