



THE WHITE HOUSE
HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

Background: History of White House Thanksgiving Traditions

Annual Turkey Pardon, Holiday Meals, Activities and More

The White House Thanksgiving celebration has been traced back to President Abraham Lincoln, when the president declared in October 1863 that the last Thursday in November would be commemorated as Thanksgiving Day. Lincoln is also credited with the first turkey pardon, even though it was for Christmas. According to an 1865 dispatch from White House reporter Noah Brooks: “a live turkey had been brought home for the Christmas dinner, but [Lincoln’s son Tad] interceded in behalf of its life...[Tad’s] plea was admitted and the turkey’s life spared.”

“While many turkeys have found their way to the White House over the years, it appears that most presidents did not “pardon” these birds. The formal tradition of the turkey pardon solidified in 1989 when President George H. W. Bush remarked: “‘Reprieve,’ ‘keep him going,’ or ‘pardon’: It’s all the same for the turkey, as long as he doesn’t end up on the president’s holiday table.”

-Lina Mann, White House Historian

History of Thanksgiving and Turkey Pardons at the White House:

Reports of turkeys as gifts to American presidents can be traced back to the 1870s, when [Rhode Island poultry dealer Horace Vose](#) began sending well fed birds to the White House.

Turkey presentations at the White House became national news in the 1920s with accounts of turkeys taking exciting cross-country trips to the White House and arriving dressed for the occasion in goggles and sweaters, inside their decorated coops. [Read about these stories and other game sent to the White House for Thanksgiving](#), including a [raccoon that became First Lady Grace Coolidge’s pet](#).

In addition to serving a traditional turkey dinner, White House Thanksgiving meals have featured regional items such as Chesapeake Bay oysters, rockfish from the Potomac River, terrapin from Maryland's Eastern Shore, cranberries from Cape Cod, and mince and pumpkin pies.

[Learn more about how presidents spent Thanksgiving and what they ate.](#)

Stories of note:

- In 1921, [one turkey named Supreme II traveled to the White House by airplane](#) at a time when flight was still a novelty and delivery of letters and packages via air mail had only recently begun. The turkey traveled in style “wearing an aviation helmet and goggles and clad in a black and gold sweater held on by a pink bow.” Turkeys are not well suited for flight—and the trip ended early when Supreme II became air sick. The turkey made the rest of the trip to the White House by train.
- In 1922—President Warren G. Harding’s last Thanksgiving at the White House—the Harding Girls Club of Chicago sent another turkey on a wild ride. Supreme III, who the girls fattened on chocolates, took a sensational, record-breaking road trip. He traveled more than 800 miles in just under 38 hours, and like his predecessors made national news. The *Atlanta Constitution* noted that the turkey had traveled comfortably: “a motor coat was made especially for him” and an “extra-large cage, suspended by and set on springs, to prevent too much shake-up on the trip.”
- President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed legislation (H.J. Res 41) in 1941 designating the fourth Thursday in November as the federal Thanksgiving Day holiday.
- President Harry S. Truman was the first president to receive a turkey from the Poultry and Egg National Board and National Turkey Federation. Although Truman did not start the turkey pardon tradition, his administration made turkey presentations a presidential media event that continues today.
- In the mid-twentieth century, the Poultry and Egg National Board and the National Turkey Federation started presenting turkeys to the White House. President John F. Kennedy pardoned a turkey meant for his table in 1963, as did some of his successors on occasion. Later during Ronald Reagan’s presidency, the pardon became part of the turkey presentation ceremony in the Rose Garden. President George H.W. Bush made it an annual tradition by pardoning every turkey during his administration. All presidents since have continued the turkey pardon as a light-hearted press event in the days leading up to Thanksgiving.

For more information and stories, visit whitehousehistory.org. [See a photo album of high-res turkey pardons images here.](#) Please credit The White House Historical Association when using photos or information.

For media inquiries or to schedule an interview with Historian Lina Mann, please contact press@whha.org.

About The White House Historical Association

First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy envisioned a restored White House that conveyed a sense of history through its decorative and fine arts. In 1961, the White House Historical Association was established to support her vision to preserve and share the Executive Mansion's legacy for generations to come. Supported entirely by private resources, the Association's mission is to assist in the preservation of the state and public rooms, fund acquisitions for the White House permanent collection, and educate the public on the history of the White House. Since its founding, the White House Historical Association has contributed more than \$50 million in fulfillment of its mission. To learn more about the White House Historical Association, please visit www.whitehousehistory.org.

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