The celebration of Thanksgiving as a national holiday in late November was not enacted until the 1870s. The official reason was to commemorate the landing at Plymouth of the nation’s Puritan forefathers and foremothers. The holiday’s national designation stemmed from two forces. The first was the unceasing will of author Sarah Josepha Hale, who spent 40 years of her adult life campaigning for the declaration of Thanksgiving as a national holiday.

The second was the Civil War and its aftermath. Thanksgiving celebrates the American nation and the country’s citizens’ unity within it and subordination to it. So, it is not surprising that Abraham Lincoln issued the first national proclamation for its observance and that his successors, encouraged by Hale, instituted the national date of a Thursday in late November.

Before the establishment of Thanksgiving as a national holiday, states held their own observances on a variety of dates under different names. As the location of the Pilgrims’ landing, Massachusetts commemorated the first arrival of the Puritans on the Mayflower at the site of Plymouth Rock, which they identified as Dec. 22.

In the town of Plymouth itself, public celebrations began to take place in 1798, and accounts of celebrations over the next 25 years appear in the Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts, vol. 17.

Plymouth’s observances contained three main parts: a religious ceremony that included a procession around the town and a sermon or “oration”; a large dinner followed by the drinking of numerous toasts to leaders past and present; and a festive ball filled with dancing and merriment. This last item is usually accompanied by thanks to the town’s women for organizing such an enjoyable evening.

Toasts feature prominently in the local news reports, which often list them. The dinner of 1798 features 29 separate toasts. Unsurprisingly, later reports reveal worries about public drunkenness.

Plymouth’s annual observance of the “Pilgrim Anniversary” took place just three days before the traditional date of Christmas, Dec. 25. True to their Puritan heritage, most people in Massachusetts during the 18th and early 19th centuries did not celebrate Christmas.

On Dec. 25, shops were open for their normal hours, children attended school, and daily life continued as normal. Merrymakers were often prosecuted for disturbing the peace. Massachusetts continued this treatment of Christmas until well after the Civil War.