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FROM MACY'S TO NFL, THANKSGIVING TRADITIONS EXPLAINED

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USA TODAY

How did a holiday rooted in English Pilgrims and Native Americans sharing a harvest feast become a day defined by giant animal floats, football and shopping 'til you drop?

The traditions that we now see as synonymous with Thanksgiving each have their own history. A look back at the evolution of some of the touchstones of this distinctly American holiday.

Official Thanksgiving holiday

The idea of creating a formal national holiday originated with Abraham Lincoln. In an 1863 proclamation – amid the still-raging Civil War – Lincoln designated Thanksgiving to be celebrated on the fourth Thursday of November. Decades later, Franklin D. Roosevelt moved the holiday up a week, to the third Thursday of November, in part to lengthen the amount of time for holiday shopping. Some states still insisted on celebrating Thanksgiving on the last Thursday, so eventually Congress stepped in. On Dec. 26, 1941, less than a month after the attack at Pearl Harbor, Congress passed a law declaring the fourth Thursday of November as Thanksgiving Day.

Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade

A little more than 60 years after the holiday's formal recognition, another tradition was born: the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade. Started in 1924, the department store's first parade included actual animals from the Central Park Zoo. A few years later, Macy's unveiled its first ballooned character, Felix the Cat, according to Macy's.com.



Last year's Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade in New York City on Nov. 22.
(Photo: Robert Deutsch, USA TODAY)

Football

There are few traditions more associated with Thanksgiving Day than watching football, and it all started with the Detroit Lions, according to the Pro Football Hall of Fame website. In 1934, the newly created Lions, in an effort to appeal to fans in their inaugural season, played the world champion Chicago Bears. Although the Lions lost 19-16, the game had a strong turnout – 26,000 seats sold – and was broadcast nationally on NBC Radio. The Lions have remained a holiday fixture, playing a game on Thanksgiving Day every year since 1945.

Turkey pardoning

The presidential turkey pardon has also become a Thanksgiving tradition, but its origins are a bit murky. According to a 2011 blog post on the White House website, President George H.W. Bush in 1989

was the first president to grant a pardon – the turkey in question was sent to, of all places, Frying Pan Park in Herndon, Va. – but other presidents have also been credited with offering reprieves. In one story, President Lincoln's son, Tad, pleaded with his father to let the turkey destined for the family's Christmas dinner to live. In 1963, President John F. Kennedy returned a turkey from National Turkey Federation. President Richard Nixon also turned away turkeys, sending them to a petting farm.

Black Friday

Thanksgiving traditions don't end on Thanksgiving Day. In the 1950s, the day after Thanksgiving was called Black Friday by factory managers because so many workers called in sick, according to Harvard historian Nancy Koehn, on Marketplace.org. In the 1960s, the Philadelphia Police Department took to

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calling the day Black Friday to describe the traffic jams, crowds and shoplifters during the start of the holiday shopping season. It wasn't until the 1980s that merchants tried to recast the name as something positive.

"They did so by pointing to all the 'black ink' that showed up on balance sheets as a result of the day," according to Koehn.

Black Friday signals the start of the holiday shopping season, but it may be a tradition that's continuing to evolve as stores vie to be the earliest to open. Macy's, for example, is opening on Thanksgiving Day for the first time in its 155-year history.

"The reason for wanting to do this is whoever opens first wins this huge pot of people waiting to do their Christmas shopping," said Jean-Pierre Dube, mar-

keting professor at the University of Chicago's Booth School of Business. Dube said, "It wouldn't surprise me two years from now if people start their Black Friday sales on Wednesday."