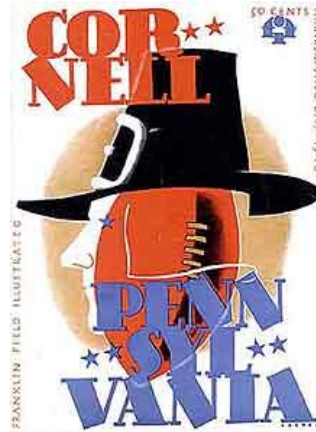


THANKSGIVING TOUCHDOWN!

2006 Online Thanksgiving Exhibition
by Peggy M. Baker, Director & Librarian
Pilgrim Society & Pilgrim Hall Museum



Thanksgiving is far more than a festive family dinner! Even that famous “First Thanksgiving at Plymouth” incorporated sporting events. Edward Winslow, describing the harvest celebration of 1621, wrote

"at which time amongst other Recreations, we exercised our Armes, many of the Indians coming amongst us, and amongst the rest their greatest king Massasoyt, with some ninetie men, whom for three dayes we entertained and feasted..."

Could one of those “Recreations” and part of that “Entertainment” have been football?

Certainly, “foot ball” would have been known to the Pilgrims as an elementary form of soccer (which is still “football” to most of the world). Games of kicking balls are of great antiquity. The record is far too sparse, however, to make a direct connection to that First Thanksgiving at Plymouth.



Even though the tradition of the annual Thanksgiving football game does not date from 1621, it has a long and honorable history. There have been football games on Thanksgiving Day for well over one hundred years.

How did Thanksgiving and football become so closely associated in the American mind?

Read on for the fascinating story.

A very crude game of ball-kicking was being played at East Coast colleges, such as Harvard and Yale, in the 1840s or before. Most colleges outlawed the game in the early 1860s – the tensions that eventually led to the Civil War were causing divisions on campus and a game like football, very physical and almost totally without rules, could easily erupt into violence. Perhaps because of that very physicality and flexibility, however, football remained popular with college men.

After the Civil War, football officially returned to college campuses. The first intercollegiate game was played in 1869 between Princeton and Rutgers. There were 25 players to a side and the ball could be kicked or head-butted - but not carried. Rutgers won that first game 6 to 4; a rematch one week later was won by Princeton, 8 to 0.

By 1872, Columbia, Yale and Harvard men were also playing football as an official, college-sanctioned sport. Harvard's rules were so unique, however, that it couldn't play against the other college teams – its games were intramural. In 1874, however, Harvard agreed to play against the Canadian university, McGill. McGill's rules were similar to those being used at Harvard but included an innovation that Harvard agreed to accept – players were permitted to run with the ball. This technique created great enthusiasm and Harvard challenged Yale to a game using the new rules.

The first Harvard-Yale game was played in 1875 before a crowd of 2000 spectators who

had paid \$0.50 apiece. The next year, Harvard, Columbia, Yale, Princeton and Pennsylvania formed the Intercollegiate Football Association. The Association agreed to use the Harvard rules - and agreed that the two strongest teams would meet each year on Thanksgiving Day in New York City in a game that would determine the championship.

The first Thanksgiving championship game, played in 1876, was between Yale and Princeton. Yale won. The Thanksgiving Day game soon became the prominent athletic contest of the college season, linking the middle class (with their hunger for higher education) with intercollegiate sports (and its ideals of fair play and good sportsmanship) and a national American holiday, Thanksgiving.

That connection has never been broken.



The Intercollegiate Football Association, in addition to initiating the Thanksgiving day championship game, also began to institute uniform standards. The Association established a playing time of two 45-minute halves, a field measurement of 140 yards by 70 yards, and set the number of players on the field per side at 15. Rules of play and of conduct, however, were almost nonexistent.



The result - as shown in this image from *Harper's Weekly* of December 7, 1878 - was often mayhem!

It took time for the Association standards to be accepted by everyone, and many football teams continued to set their own rules of play. In 1879, *Harper's Weekly* wrote

“Of all athletic games foot-ball is perhaps the easiest to comprehend, an ability to kick being the only qualification required. A large park or common is best suited to the game, its great advantage being that any number of players may take part, irrespective of age or size.”

The example of the East Coast colleges, however, eventually prevailed and the Association rules (which continued to be revised and refined) were accepted.

The Thanksgiving Day game for the Association Championship continued - and grew in popularity and significance. The contests were regularly featured in national magazines, such as *Harper's Weekly*, which illustrated the "Football Match Between Yale and Princeton, November 27" in their December 20, 1879 issue.

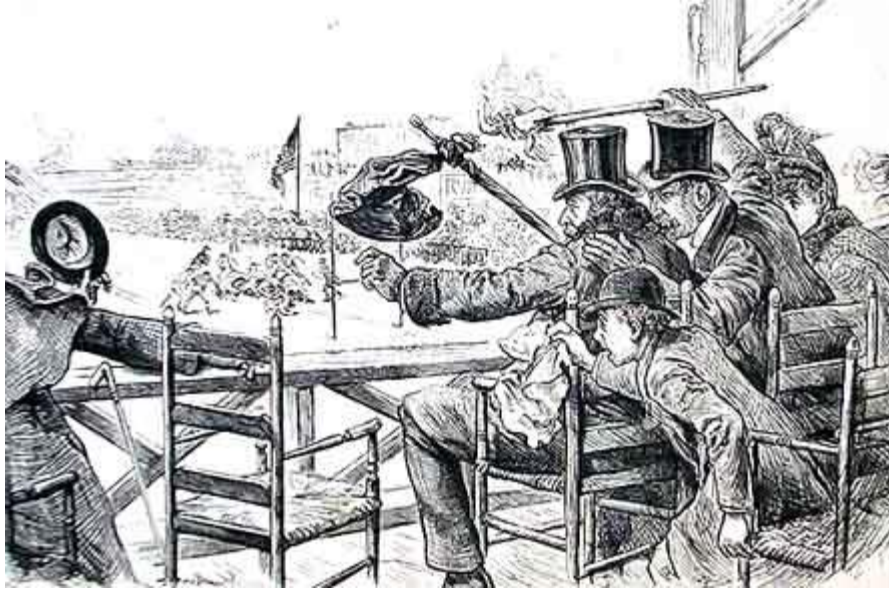


"... a spirited engraving illustrating a thrilling moment in the match that took place between Yale and Princeton on the afternoon of Thanksgiving-day. The meeting of the teams was the great event of the foot-ball season, and, so far as college sports are concerned, one of the most important of the year."

Harper's Weekly December 20, 1879

The following year, 1880, the number of players on each side was reduced to 11, the quarterback appeared and the scrimmage was established. More and more colleges began to play the game.

The Thanksgiving Day game blossomed in the 1880s and 1890s, as the crowds grew larger and larger - and more and more impassioned.



**“The ardor and the joy of a game at foot-ball”
Harper's Weekly, November 10, 1888**

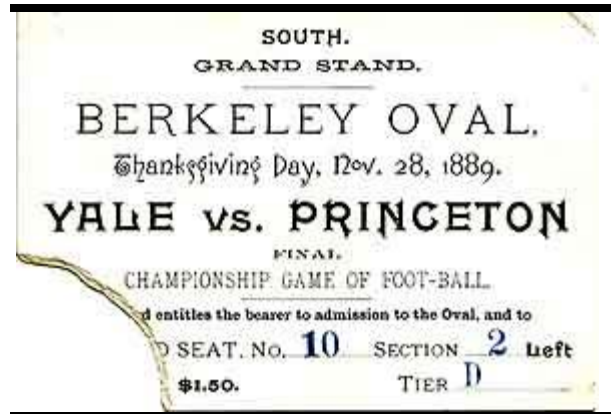
"Not more than a dozen years ago the only sport which passed in this country by the name of foot-ball was a nondescript running and kicking match indulged in after a Thanksgiving dinner. The audience consisted of the few relatives and members of the family who were incapacitated by age from any physical exercise. All others who had enjoyed the dinner were expected to join the game.

The foot-ball match of to-day is a scientific contest, for which during three months upward of fifty men have carefully trained, practiced, and perfected themselves in all the strategies of a studied campaign. Out of this fifty have been selected twenty-two men, eleven from each university, and these the very picture of muscular agility and endurance. And the audience! Never until the advent of this sport has anything like it been assembled. Ten thousand people, the bulk of them flying college colors, would make a grand sight anywhere, but nowhere could such charmingly picturesque groupings be found as those of the annual Thanksgiving Day game at the Polo Grounds... Our artist has evidently selected the front seats of the grand stand from which to make his sketch, and in the excited faces of the two men in the foreground one easily recognizes the old undergraduate enthusiasm stirred into new life by the excitement of the game. Youth shines once more in their faces almost as strongly as in the bright face of the boy behind them. He perhaps is exulting in the prowess of an elder brother “on the team” and looking forward to the time when he too shall be representing his university.”

Harper's Weekly, November 10, 1888

Part of the reason for football's increased popularity was the dramatic increase in press coverage of college football. Games, which were originally considered to be events that concerned only the alumni of the schools participating in them, grew to be events of national interest. Interest in college sports extended into all social classes.

The 1889 Thanksgiving Day championship game between Princeton and Yale, played before an audience of 25,000, was a classic example.



"The Princeton-Yale Foot-Ball Match at the Berkeley Oval"
Harper's Weekly December 7, 1889

"Princeton wrested the inter-collegiate foot-ball championship from Yale on Thanksgiving day, at Berkeley Oval, in a game which marks an epoch in foot-ball in this country, both in point of skill and bitterness of contest. The game was witnessed by the greatest crowd of spectators ever gathered upon a foot-ball field on this side of the Atlantic, and was played to the finish by the two best-trained and most skilful teams that have faced each other in America. There were, at a safe estimate, 25,000 persons present. The crowd filled all the seats prepared by the management, covered the tops of nearly a hundred coaches, banked a dozen deep around the fences, concealed the hill-side to the south and southwest for many yards back and hung in the branches of trees all around the oval. It was a crowd about evenly divided in its sympathies between the competing colleges, and the enthusiasm took a deafening shape when play began, and was continuous under the alternating

advantages of one and the other side until the very end.”

Harper's Weekly December 7, 1889

The 1889 Yale-Princeton game was also depicted in *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*. The Leslie artist concentrated on the game itself, not on the crowd. The main illustration is "Quarter-Back Passing the Ball." Other strategies that were illustrated included a "Down," a "Fair Catch," a "Punt" and "Breaking Thru a Rush Line" - all new and unfamiliar tactics that *Leslie's* readers would find interesting.



During the 1890s, football became increasingly violent. The descriptions of the games in the press continue to emphasize the excitement of the crowd, but the images illustrate the rising level of physicality.



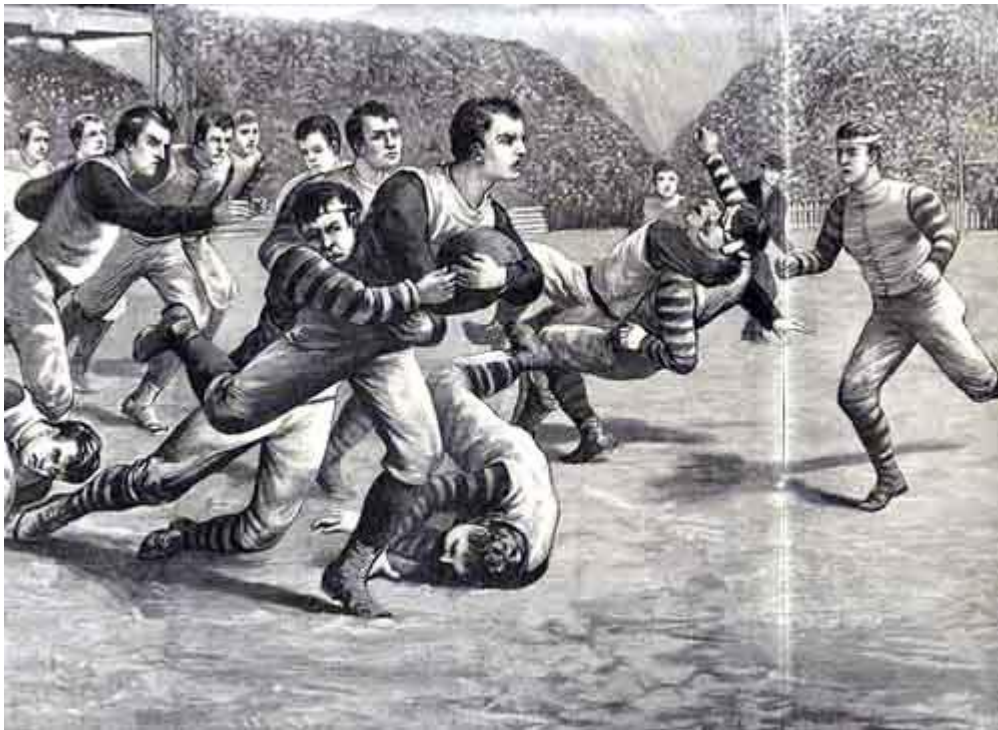
**“Foot-ball – A Collision at the Ropes”
by Frederic Remington
Harper’s Weekly November 29. 1890**

“One of the features of Thanksgiving day in New York is the concluding game of football in the series of matches for the championship of the Intercollegiate Foot-ball Association. During the past few years New York city has been the scene of the annual contest, and the old Polo Grounds at 110th Street has been the battle-ground of many a well-fought struggle. Thousands of people have sat or stood in the cold November air watching twenty-two men in a desperate fight over the sphere of leather until darkness closed upon the scene, and the air was heavy with the cries of the graduates and undergraduates of nearly all the colleges in the East. One year the game is played upon the frozen ground, when badly damages faces result from the heavy falls; another year sees the field a mass of sticky mud, covering the contestants so that one is scarcely able to distinguish friend from foe; and another year the snow is shoveled away from the field, and along its edges there are soft places for the men to fall.

The day of the great match has come, and Princeton and Yale are the opponents... almost every inch of available ground is covered with sightseers. Coaches are standing as near as they can get to the field, and the air resounds with the yells of the students who are perched up on the top of the four-in-hands, and who are frantically waving their bunches of yellow and black or dark blue ribbons. The “Sis-boom-ah!” Princeton’s skyrocket cheer, alternates with the snapping “Rah! ‘rah! ‘rah!” of Yale as one side or the other gets a small advantage. A good kick or a good run is the signal for wild huzzahs, and it is a wonder that throats are not split as the students try to outdo each other in making a noise. A Princeton player gets the ball in the middle of

the field, and away he goes in a zigzag course toward the Yale goal. His team is with him, getting in the way of the Yale rushers when they are about to pounce upon him, and interference is the order of the minute. He slips under the outstretched arms of his adversaries, but they are working him nearer and nearer the ropes. The leathern sphere is under one arm, and the other arm swings free. The runner has passed all the rushers, and is upon the ropes almost, when a new opponent looms up; a brawny half back seizes him just as he is about to dodge into the center of the field again, and down he goes, with the foot-ball hugged to his breast, and in an instant the whole of the Yale team is upon him... All is intense excitement, and the thousands of partisans who are watching the playing are anxious to get in and help. Hundreds of pretty girls, bedecked with the ribbons of their sweethearts, brothers, and friends, urge the players on to renewed efforts."

Harper's Weekly November 29. 1890

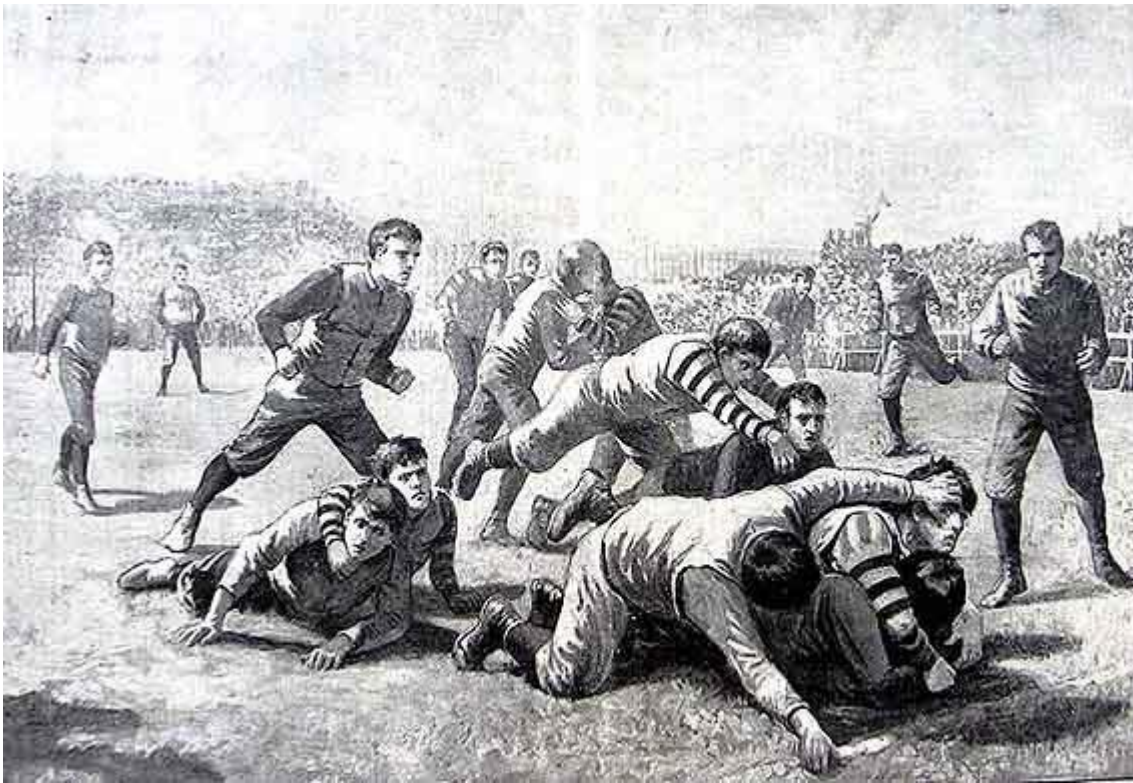


**"New York – The Great Football Match Between Yale and Princeton,
Played on Thanksgiving day at Manhattan Field."
Once A Week (magazine), 1891.**

"At eleven o'clock, the crowd commenced to come. As only the seats on the grandstand were reserved, it was first come, first served, on all the others. Everybody came loaded down with lunch-baskets and rugs... By one o'clock all the open stands were filled: from top to bottom was one flaming mass of blue, and orange and black. The partisans of the two colleges were mingled indiscriminately. College cries rolled back and forth like volleys of musketry. Every incident called forth a cheer. When a coach rolled in and took its position, it was cheered by the partisans whose favorite colors it carried. The greatest ingenuity was used by the adherents of both colleges in devising

original ways of showing their favoritism. Two Princeton men had an enormous wooden rattle that took their utmost strength to work, and which made a most unearthly din; four Yale men stalked solemnly about, each with a big blue letter on his back which spelt out the word "Yale." All this brought out vociferous cheering. The women were out in full force, all wearing either the yellow chrysanthemum or a bunch of violets, and ribbons and bright silk handkerchiefs galore. Gorgeous Yale and Princeton umbrellas were everywhere, and the Yale mascot, a bulldog with a blue blanket on, was solemnly led around the field. On one side of the field stood a long row of coaches packed with spectators, and all fantastically rigged out with enormous banners."

Once A Week (magazine), 1891



**Almost a "Touch-Down" – an incident of the great Yale-Princeton Football match,
at Manhattan Field, on Thanksgiving Day**

Once A Week (magazine), 1892

In 1892, Yale defeated Princeton 12-0 while thirty thousand spectators watched

It was not until 1896 that helmets were introduced. The violence of the game, however, continued to grow. New rules were finally instituted in 1905 after a particularly violent year – 18 players were killed and over 150 received severe injuries – inspired President Theodore Roosevelt to meet with the presidents of the "Big Three" – Yale, Harvard and Princeton – to discuss the importance of playing within the "spirit of the rules." The Intercollegiate Athletic Association of the United States, which

was renamed the National Collegiate Athletic Association in 1910, was formed. Many of the rules that the Association instituted were designed to eliminate violence and improve sportsmanship. Others were designed to make the game more exciting for the spectator.

Because of its dramatic possibilities, football was a favored subject for many popular authors, with stories appearing not only in magazines and newspapers, but also in "dime novels."

Football games were portrayed as symbolic battles of honor. Football players were seen as warriors and heroes.

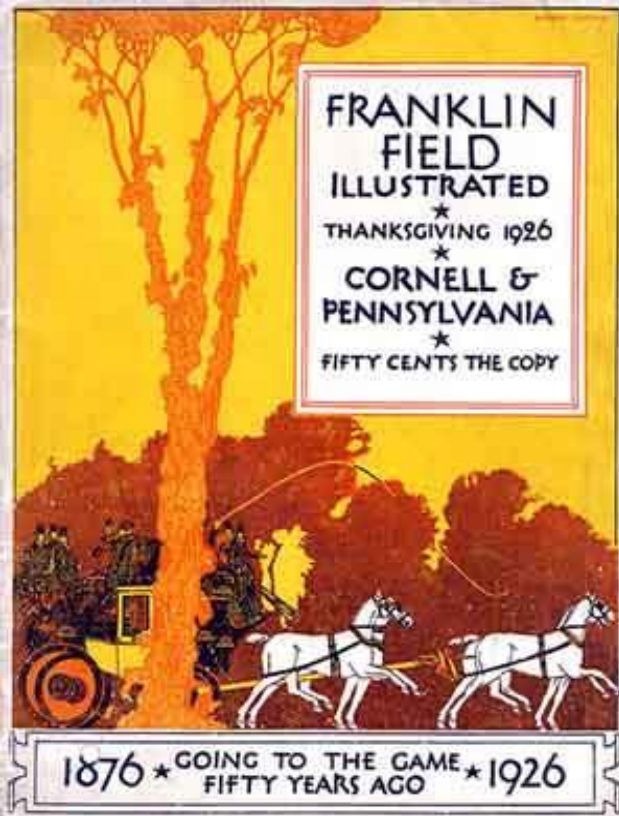
By 1919, no quarterback would have carried the ball without a helmet - but the hero of this "Thanksgiving Football Novel" is portrayed bareheaded, the better to show off his square jaw, firm chin and manly good looks.





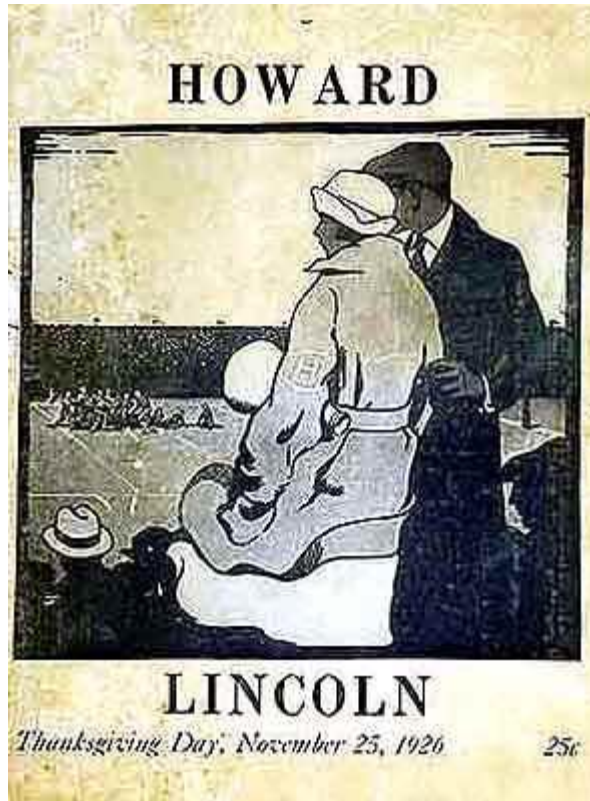
By the early years of the 20th century, regional football conferences had been formed and the tradition of the Thanksgiving day football game spread throughout the country.

It was not only the date of the game that was traditional. Many colleges also faced the same traditional rivals on Thanksgiving Day year after year.

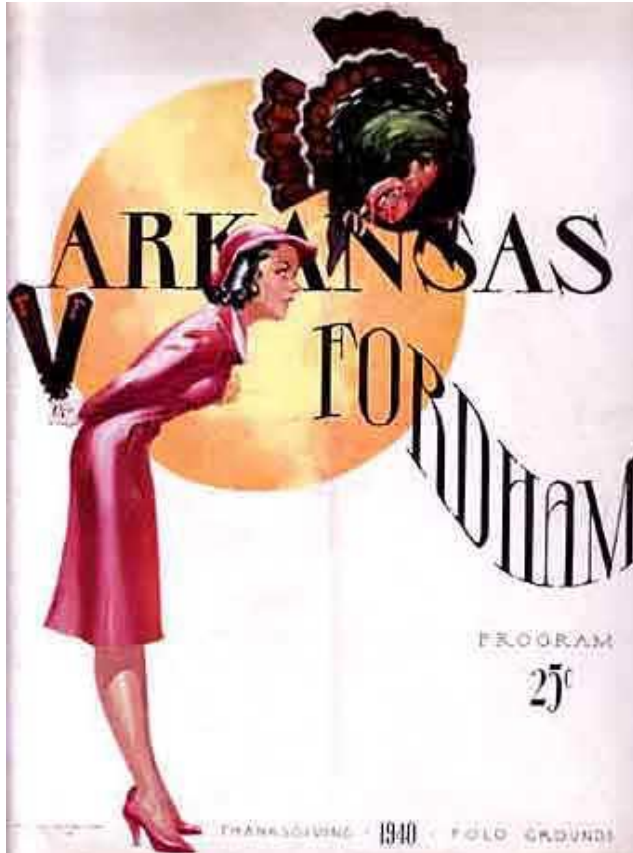


The 1926 University of Pennsylvania vs. Cornell Thanksgiving Day Football Game Program notes that “It is hardly necessary to extend the usual formal welcome to Cornell this afternoon. We have met the Ithacans without interruption over a longer period, and with mutual pleasure and respect, than any other team on our schedule [since 1893!]. The only break was in 1918, and that was not really a break, because the World War caused a cancellation of all intercollegiate games that year.”

The program notes that 1926 was the 50th year of intercollegiate football for the University of Pennsylvania. Among the changes – during Penn’s first football match, against Princeton, one member of the Penn team sustained injuries from which he died a few years later. Not only were the rules much tighter by 1926, but players wore protective equipment and trained and conditioned themselves before the season began. The tradition of the Thanksgiving Day football game cut across regions, it cut across races. Football on Thanksgiving Day had become a true "All American" tradition.



"Americanism" became a common theme in football program books, a theme that was portrayed most openly during the 1940s.



Thanksgiving, by Tim Cohane

Thanks for this –
Eleven men of solid thew,
Strong of back, courageous too.
Taught to play this Autumn game
Hard, for not to kill or main,
Just clean and true.

Thanks for this –
Front line trench, and there a guard,
Death to all who don't run hard.
But no fate of tortured scream,
Just a 'trap or double-team'
To gain a yard.

Thanks for this –
Only air raids that we know
Come when halfbacks fade & throw.
When a tackle shakes or bends
There's a trainer's hand that mends,
No crosses grow.

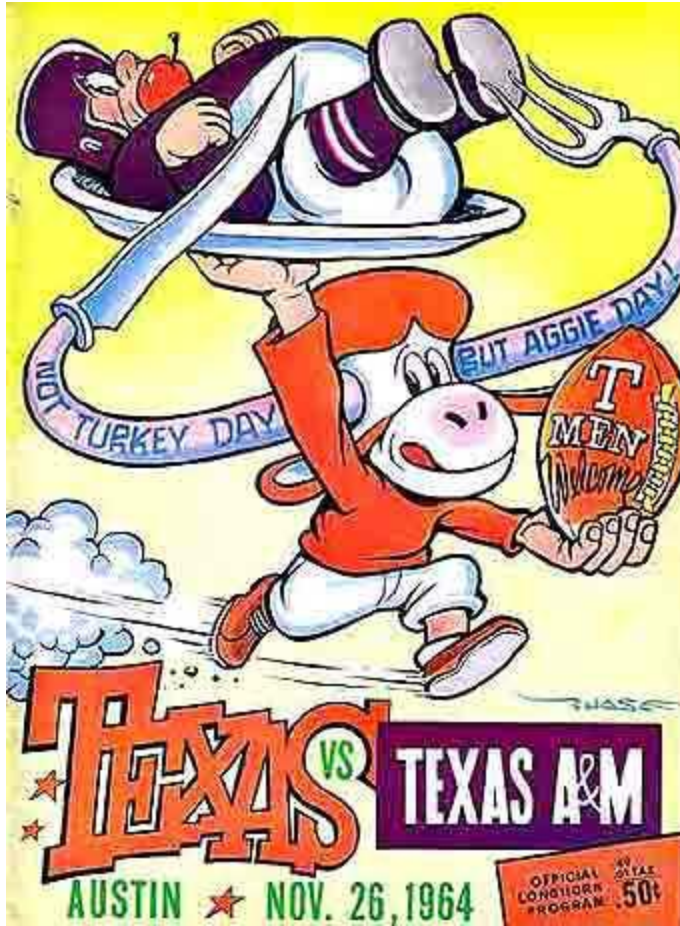
1940 Arkansas vs Fordham

The program book for the 1943 game between Texas and Texas A&M noted:

“Today’s game is being broadcast throughout the world by shortwave, to all the Aggies and the former students of the University of Texas who are stationed in the war zones. And so today’s game is dedicated – dedicated to those fighting sons of both schools, who learned the rules of sportsmanship and fair play on the fields of friendly strife and who are today garnering the fruits of victory in the name of freedom on the far-flung battle fronts of Democracy.”



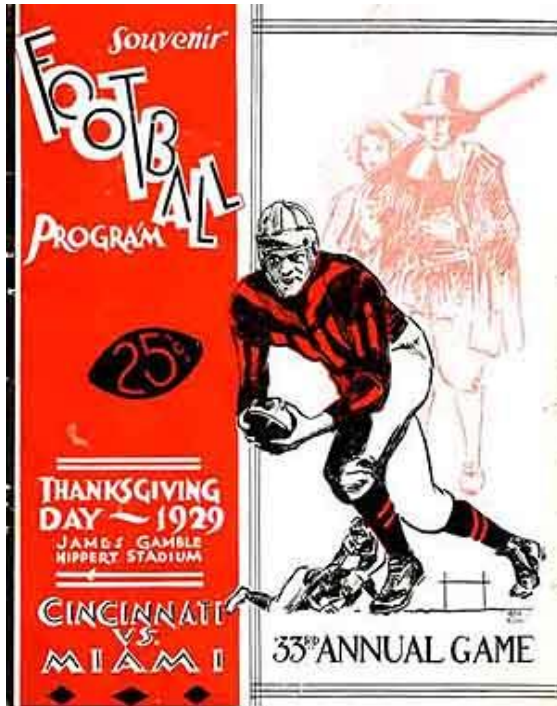
Texas’ very first football game was played on Thanksgiving day – November 30, 1893, against the Dallas Foot Ball Club. Texas’ historic Thanksgiving rivalry with Texas A&M began in 1920. Both schools were undefeated that year and the largest crowd that had ever attended a football game in Texas (estimated at 20,000) attended to see the Texas Longhorns win the championship of the Southwest.



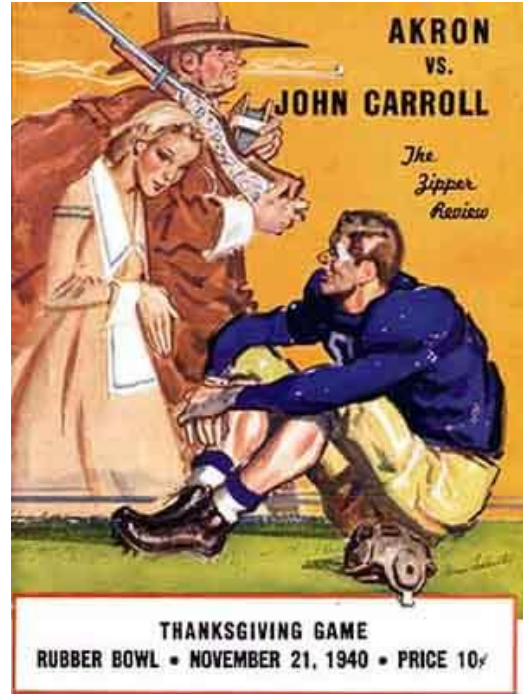
Texas & Texas A&M now play on the Saturday AFTER Thanksgiving - and their programs tend towards the humorous

Football also became associated with the Pilgrims.

Some football programs pictured the Pilgrims as idealized spirits, hovering over the field of play and inspiring (or praying for) the players.



1929 Cincinnati v Miami



1940 Akron v John Carroll

Others, like this 1932 Oregon v St. Mary's program, are not sure that the relationship between football and the Pilgrims is an entirely comfortable one! The image used on the program is a take-off on a very famous illustration by Leyendecker published on the cover of the November 1928 *Saturday Evening Post*.



The question of whether watching a football game was an appropriate way to spend Thanksgiving Day is not a modern issue. The question was raised in 1891 - and the answer given may surprise you!

In 1891, *Harper's Weekly* contrasted the "old" and "new" ways of spending the day:

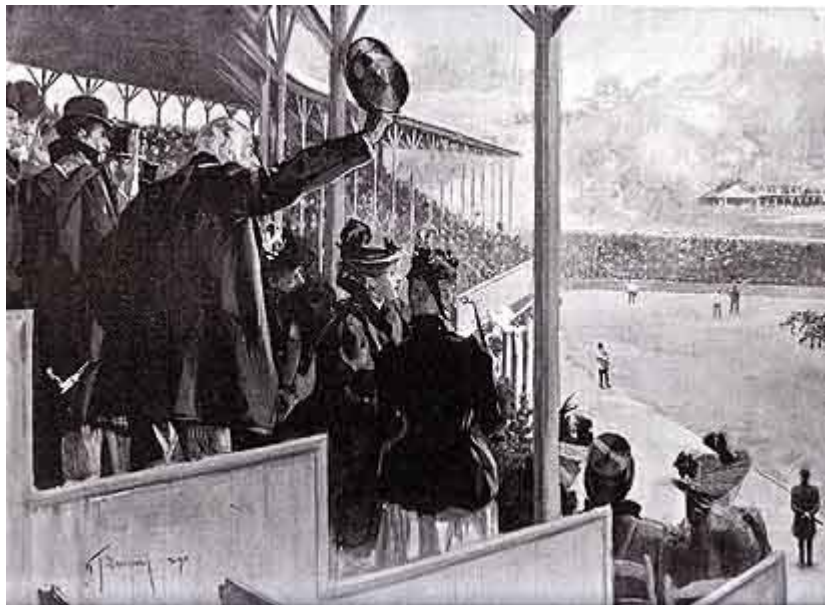
"It used to be that Thanksgiving day in New York was, like the day all over the Eastern part of the country, a holiday which centred around a dinner. This dinner was inevitable and the families saw each other then that never saw each other in a group at any other town... The prodigal returned for it; the poor relation looked forward to it, and praised it as it progressed heavily through its different courses; and the several members of the family tried to be more polite and genial and loving towards one another at that meal than at any other of the three times 365 other meals of the year. There are some who like family dinners; and there are other wicked ones who sympathize with the young woman who assented to having a family dinner by saying, 'Yes, and let us have any family but our own!'



It is an awful and solemn ceremony in many homes, and it is made more so, as a rule, by some one of the elder of the poor relations, who endeavors to enliven the general gloom by trying to be 'the life of the dinner.' He does this by growing reminiscent over the younger members, and telling how pretty they were as children, and how they used to make him tell and retell the old story of the roast pig he stole the night before Gettysburg, with which introduction he promptly tells the old story again."

Harper's then contrasts the "Old" with the "New":

"It may not be so elsewhere, but around New York city all this has changed. It is not that the families around the great metropolis love each other less, or that they have less cause or less desire to be thankful; but a great and powerful and fascinating rival has come to take the place of the Thanksgiving day dinner, and it is known not only in New York, but from Texas, or wherever else a Yale man is carrying a transit, to Canada, or wherever else the Princeton man is building a bridge, as The Thanksgiving Day Game. And now everybody goes out to see Princeton and Yale decide the football championship, and instead of boring each other around a dinner table, grow hoarse and exhausted in shouting for their favorite son or the college of their son.



Mr. W. T. Smedley [the artist who drew the two images] has shown you the old way and the new, and you must all agree that the fresh air and the excitement and the wonderful movement of the great crowd and color of the whole scene are better even than turkey and pumpkin pie. And may the best team win!"



Postcard c. 1900.

Turn-of-the-century Americans could not have imagined a development of the future - televised Thanksgiving day football games!

The first football games were televised in 1939 to a very limited audience in New York. Television was experimental and there were few television sets. Television broadcasting ceased during the Second World War.



After the war, however, televisions quickly became “must-have” purchases and the number of television sets in American homes exploded.

By Thanksgiving 1949, there were 2,000,000 televisions sets in the United States, with 720,000 in New York City alone. And enough of them were tuned to the Thanksgiving Day football game for a new tradition to be born!

By the following year, Thanksgiving 1950, there were 8,000,000 TV sets in the United States.

Football was, of course, not just a college sport. It was played by Americans of all ages -and played on Thanksgiving!

In 1844, James Spooner of Plymouth, then aged 13, wrote an essay on "Thanksgiving":

"Thanksgiving day is a day appointed by the Governor for us to give thanks to God for the past season. It comes in Autumn just after the harvest which is the best time as we have then the remembrance of the goodness of God more fresh on our minds. It originated among our forefathers but no doubt it was meant by them that we should spend it in a very different manner from what we do. I will endeavour to show how it is generally spent nowadays. The families nearest connected take turns in having each other to thanksgiving as it is called. In the forenoon there is a meeting at the various churches in town and then they go home not to continue in giving thanks to God but to...feast on roast turkey, plum pudding and a variety of other good things! **In the afternoon the boys generally kick football** or skate, and in the evening commonly have what is called a "candy folic," that is making molasses candy."

Victorian author Abby Morton Diaz incorporated the informal Thanksgiving day football game into her 1873 novel *Lucy Maria*, a story of growing up in Plymouth. Her character William Henry says:

"After dinner I went with Cousin Joe and William Henry to Slade's Field to kick. It is good to go to Slade's Field of a Thanksgiving Day, and see there all the returned sons, prodigal and unprodigal, apprentices, clerks, collegians, and all the stay-at-homes, -- boys, youths, and married men, -- unite in one grand game of foot-ball (kicking case). William Henry said he remembered how proud he used to think the big fellows were that came home to Thanksgiving all dressed up. And now he's a big fellow dressed up himself. For my part, I am glad there's one day in the year when even grown-up men can kick something. Such a lively, exciting scramble! Such runs and tumbles!

With Thanksgiving day football games being popular both for families and for colleges, high-school football games on Thanksgiving Day soon followed.

The earliest known high school football game played on Thanksgiving day was in 1882 between Needham High and Wellesley High, both of Massachusetts. The oldest continuous rivalry is between Boston Latin and Boston English High Schools, a Thanksgiving Day contest that has taken place annually since 1887.



High school football games soon entered popular literature.

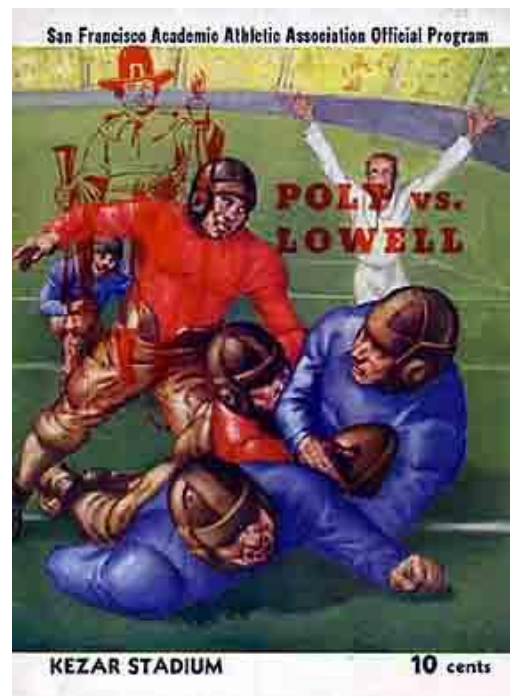
Young Dick Merriwell, hero of numerous moral and character-building adventure stories in the early years of the 20th century, played in "The Great Thanksgiving Day Game" in 1905.

The fictional Merriwells were two brothers – Frank, who attended Yale (and, of course, played football) and his younger brother Dick, who attended prep school. Both young men were brave and honest “athlete-heroes” whose stories, published in *Tip Top Weekly* (“An Ideal Publication for the American Youth”) inspired millions of American boys.

San Francisco's Thanksgiving Day high-school football game tradition began in 1926 when Lowell beat Poly in Kezar Stadium before more than 15,000 fans. The annual clash between the two schools on Thanksgiving Day during the late 1920s and early 1930s attracted huge crowds (estimated at 50,000 for one game).

This title game for the San Francisco Academic Athletic Association became known as the Turkey Bowl in the 1940s.

Kezar Stadium was rebuilt in the early 1990s and is still the site of the Turkey Bowl, the championship rivalry for the 8-team public school athletic association.



1938 Program

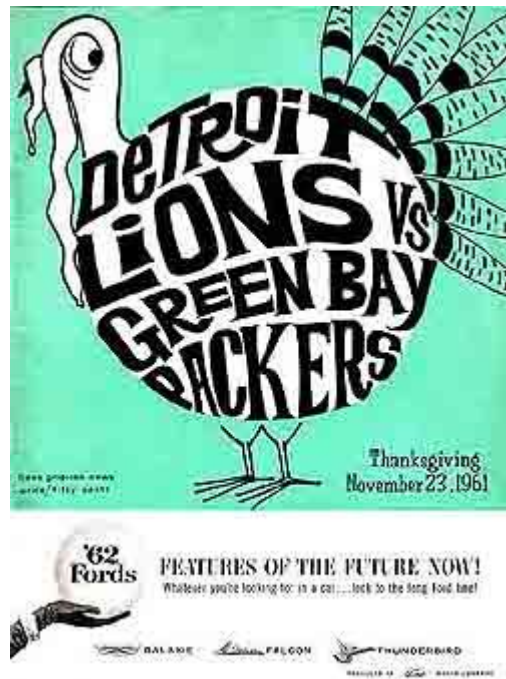
The tradition of Thanksgiving Day football games continues today in Massachusetts and in San Francisco - and across the country. As Jim Gigliotti says on the NFL Website:

“Throughout the United States, high school football on Thanksgiving Day is as big a part of the celebration as turkey and pumpkin pie. Though some areas have had to abandon games on the holiday to accommodate ever-burgeoning state playoffs, many locales would sooner skip the day's big meal than break from the tradition of Thanksgiving Day football.”

Professional football began in 1920 when the American Professional Football Association (later known as the National Football League) was formed. That same year, the first professional football game was played on Thanksgiving Day. Akron, led by African-American quarterback Fritz Pollard, defeated the Canton Bulldogs, led by Jim Thorpe, 7 to 0.

Professional football became a true national pastime in 1934 when NBC Radio became to nationally broadcast National Football League games. The first game to be broadcast was a Thanksgiving Day match-up between the defending NFL champion Chicago Bears and the Detroit Lions. Chicago won, 19 to 16.

The Thanksgiving Day football game tradition has continued in Detroit ever since.



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*Thanksgiving Touchdown!***

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