

History of Prayer in America

Days of Prayer have a long history in America. Colonists declared Days of Prayer during droughts, Indian attacks and threats from other nations. Edward Winslow's record of the Pilgrims' experiences, reprinted in Alexander Young's *Chronicles of the Pilgrims* (Boston, 1841), stated: "Drought and the like considerations moved not only every good man privately to enter into examination with his own estate between God and his conscience, and so to humiliation before Him, but also to humble ourselves together before the Lord by Fasting and Prayer."

In colonial Connecticut, settlers proclaimed by legal authority a day in early spring for Fasting and Prayer. The governor customarily selected Good Friday as the annual spring fast. In 1668, the Virginia House of Burgesses in Jamestown passed an ordinance stating: "*The 27th of August appointed for a Day of Humiliation, Fasting and Prayer, to implore God's mercy*"

A notable Day of Prayer was in 1746, when French Admiral d'Anville sailed for New England, commanding the most powerful fleet of the time – 70 ships with 13,000 troops. He intended to recapture Louisburg, Nova Scotia, and destroy from Boston to New York, all the way to Georgia. Massachusetts Governor William Shirley declared a Day of Prayer and Fasting, October 16, 1746, to pray for deliverance.

In Boston's Old South Meeting House, Rev. Thomas Prince prayed "*Send Thy tempest, Lord, upon the water...scatter the ships of our tormentors!*" Historian Catherine Drinker Bowen related that as he finished praying, the sky darkened, winds shrieked and church bells rang "a wild, uneven sound...though no man was in the steeple."

A hurricane subsequently sank and scattered the entire French fleet. With 4,000 sick and 2,000 dead, including Admiral d'Anville, French Vice-Admiral d'Estournelle threw himself on his sword. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote in his *Ballad of the French Fleet*:

"Admiral d'Anville had sworn by cross and crown, to ravage with fire and steel our helpless Boston Town...From mouth to mouth spread tidings of dismay, I stood in the Old South saying humbly: 'Let us pray!'...Like a potter's vessel broke, the great ships of the line, were carried away as smoke or sank in the brine."

As raids from France and Spain increased, Ben Franklin proposed a General Fast, which was approved by Pennsylvania's President and Council, and published in the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, December 12, 1747:

"We have...thought fit...to appoint...a Day of Fasting & Prayer, exhorting all, both Ministers & People...to join with one accord in the most humble & fervent supplications that Almighty God would mercifully interpose and still the rage of war among the nations & put a stop to the effusion of Christian blood."

On May 24, 1774, Thomas Jefferson drafted a Resolution for a Day of Fasting, Humiliation and Prayer to be observed as the British blockaded Boston's Harbor. Robert Carter Nicholas, Treasurer, introduced the Resolution in the Virginia House of Burgesses, and, with support of Patrick Henry, Richard Henry Lee and George Mason, it passed unanimously: "*This House, being deeply impressed with apprehension of the great dangers, to be derived to British America, from the hostile invasion of the City of Boston, in our sister Colony of Massachusetts... deem it highly necessary that the said first day of June be set apart, by the members of this House as a Day of Fasting, Humiliation and Prayer, devoutly to implore the Divine interposition, for averting the heavy calamity which threatens destruction to our civil rights...Ordered, therefore that the Members of this House do attend...with the Speaker, and the Mace, to the Church in this City, for the purposes aforesaid; and that the Reverend Mr. Price be appointed to read prayers, and the Reverend Mr. Gwatkin, to preach a sermon."*

George Washington wrote in his diary, June 1, 1774: *“Went to church, fasted all day.”*

Virginia’s Royal Governor, Lord Dunmore, interpreted this Resolution as a veiled protest against King George III, and dissolved the House of Burgesses, resulting in legislators meeting in Raleigh Tavern where they conspired to form the first Continental Congress.

On April 15, 1775, just four days before the Battle of Lexington, the Massachusetts Provincial Congress, led by John Hancock, declared: *“In circumstances dark as these, it becomes us, as men and Christians, to reflect that, whilst every prudent measure should be taken to ward off the impending judgments...the 11th of May next be set apart as a Day of Public Humiliation, Fasting and Prayer...to confess the sins...to implore the Forgiveness of all our Transgression.”*

On April 19, 1775, in a Proclamation of a Day of Fasting and Prayer, Connecticut Governor Jonathan Trumbull beseeched that: *“God would graciously pour out His Holy Spirit on us to bring us to a thorough repentance and effectual reformation that our iniquities may not be our ruin; that He would restore, preserve and secure the liberties of this and all the other British American colonies, and make the land a mountain of Holiness, and habitation of righteousness forever.”*

On June 12, 1775, less than two months after the Battles of Lexington and Concord, where was fired *“the shot heard ‘round the world,”* the Continental Congress, under President John Hancock, declared: *“Congress...considering the present critical, alarming and calamitous state...do earnestly recommend, that Thursday, the 12th of July next, be observed by the inhabitants of all the English Colonies on this Continent, as a Day of Public Humiliation, Fasting and Prayer, that we may with united hearts and voices, unfeignedly confess and deplore our many sins and offer up our joint supplications to the All-wise, Omnipotent and merciful Disposer of all Events, humbly beseeching Him to forgive our iniquities...It is recommended to Christians of all denominations to assemble for public worship and to abstain from servile labor and recreations of said day.”*

On July 5, 1775, the Georgia Provincial Congress passed: *“A motion...that this Congress apply to his Excellency the Governor...requesting him to appoint a Day of Fasting and Prayer throughout this Province, on account of the disputes subsisting between America and the Parent State.”*

On July 7, 1775, Georgia’s Provincial Governor replied: *“Gentlemen: I have taken the...request made by...a Provincial Congress, and must premise, that I cannot consider that meeting as constitutional; but as the request is expressed in such loyal and dutiful terms, and the ends proposed being such as every good man must most ardently wish for, I will certainly appoint a Day of Fasting and Prayer to be observed throughout this Province. Jas. Wright.”*

On July 12, 1775, in a letter to his wife explaining the Continental Congress’ decision to declare a Day of Public Humiliation, Fasting and Prayer, John Adams wrote: *“We have appointed a Continental fast. Millions will be upon their knees at once before their great Creator, imploring His forgiveness and blessing; His smiles on American Council and arms.”*

On July 19, 1775, the Continental Congress’ Journals recorded: *“Agreed, The Congress meet here to morrow morning, at half after 9 o’clock, in order to attend divine service at Mr. Duche’s’ Church; and that in the afternoon they meet here to go from this place and attend divine service at Doctor Allison’s church.”* In his Cambridge headquarters, Washington ordered, March 6, 1776: *“Thursday, the 7th...being set apart...as a Day of Fasting, Prayer and Humiliation, ‘to implore the Lord and Giver of all victory to pardon our manifold sins and wickedness, and that it would please Him to bless the Continental army with His divine favor and protection,’ all officers and soldiers*

are strictly enjoined to pay all due reverence and attention on that day to the sacred duties to the Lord of hosts for His mercies already received, and for those blessings which our holiness and uprightness of life can alone encourage us to hope through His mercy obtain."

On March 16, 1776, the Continental Congress passed without dissent a resolution presented by General William Livingston declaring: *"Congress....desirous...to have people of all ranks and degrees duly impressed with a solemn sense of God's superintending providence, and of their duty, devoutly to rely...on his aid and direction...do earnestly recommend Friday, the 17th day of May be observed by the colonies as a Day of Humiliation, Fasting and Prayer; that we may, with united hearts, confess and bewail our manifold sins and transgressions, and, by sincere repentance and amendment of life, appease God's righteous displeasure, and, through the merits and mediation of Jesus Christ, obtain this pardon and forgiveness."*

On May 15, 1776, General George Washington ordered: *"The Continental Congress having ordered Friday the 17th instant to be observed as a Day of Fasting, Humiliation and Prayer, humbly to supplicate the mercy of Almighty God, that it would please Him to pardon all our manifold sins and transgressions, and to prosper the arms of the United Colonies, and finally establish the peace and freedom of America upon a solid and lasting foundation; the General commands all officers and soldiers to pay strict obedience to the orders of the Continental Congress; that, by their unfeigned and pious observance of their religious duties, they may incline the Lord and Giver of victory to prosper our arms."*

On April 12, 1778, at Valley Forge, General Washington ordered: *"The Honorable Congress having thought proper to recommend to the United States of America to set apart Wednesday, the 22nd inst., to be observed as a day of Fasting, Humiliation and Prayer, that at one time, and with one voice, the righteous dispensations of Providence may be acknowledged, and His goodness and mercy towards our arms supplicated and implored: The General directs that the day shall be most religiously observed in the Army; that no work shall be done thereon, and that the several chaplains do prepare discourses."*

On November 11, 1779, Virginia Governor Thomas Jefferson signed a Proclamation of Prayer, which stated: *"Congress...hath thought proper...to recommend to the several States...a day of publick and solemn Thanksgiving to Almighty God, for his mercies, and of Prayer, for the continuance of his favour...That He would go forth with our hosts and crown our arms with victory; that He would grant to His church, the plentiful effusions of Divine Grace, and pour out His Holy Spirit on all Ministers of the Gospel; that He would bless and prosper the means of education, and spread the light of Christian knowledge through the remotest corners of the earth..."*

On April 6, 1780, at Morristown, General Washington ordered: *"Congress having been pleased by their Proclamation of the 11th of last month to appoint Wednesday the 22nd instant to be set apart and observed as a day of Fasting, Humiliation and Prayer...there should be no labor or recreations on that day."*

On October 11, 1782, the Congress of the Confederation passed: *"It being the indispensable duty of all nations...to offer up their supplications to Almighty God...the United States in Congress assembled...do hereby recommend it to the inhabitants of these states in general, to observe...the last Thursday, in the 28th day of November next, as a Day of Solemn Thanksgiving to God for all his mercies."*

On November 8, 1783, at the conclusion of the Revolutionary War, Massachusetts Governor John Hancock issued: *"The Citizens of these United States have every Reason for Praise and*

Gratitude to the God of their salvation...I do...appoint...the 11th day of December next (the day recommended by the Congress to all the States) to be religiously observed as a Day of Thanksgiving and Prayer, that all the people may then assemble to celebrate...that he hath been pleased to continue to us the Light of the Blessed Gospel...That we also offer up fervent supplications...to cause pure Religion and Virtue to flourish...and to fill the world with his glory."

On February 21, 1786, New Hampshire Governor John Langdon proclaimed: a Day of Public Fasting and Prayer: *"It having been the laudable practice of this State, at the opening of the Spring, to set apart a day...to...penitently confess their manifold sins and transgressions, and fervently implore the divine benediction, that a true spirit of repentance and humiliation may be poured out upon all...that he would be pleased to bless the great Council of the United States of America and direct their deliberations...that he would rain down righteousness upon the earth, revive religion, and spread abroad the knowledge of the true God, the Saviour of man, throughout the world. And all servile labor and recreations are forbidden on said day."*

At the Constitutional Convention, 1787, Ben Franklin stated: *"In the beginning of the Contest with Great Britain, when we were sensible of danger, we had daily prayer in this room for Divine protection."*

Proclaiming a Day of Prayer, Ronald Reagan said January 27, 1983: *"In 1775, the Continental Congress proclaimed the first National Day of Prayer...In 1783, the Treaty of Paris officially ended the long, weary Revolutionary War during which a National Day of Prayer had been proclaimed every spring for eight years."*

On October 31, 1785, James Madison introduced a bill in the Virginia Legislature titled, *"For Appointing Days of Public Fasting and Thanksgiving,"* which included: *"Forfeiting fifty pounds for every failure, not having a reasonable excuse."* Yale College had as its requirement, 1787: *"All the scholars are obliged to attend Divine worship in the College Chapel on the Lord's Day and on Days of Fasting and Thanksgiving appointed by public authority."*

The same week Congress passed the Bill of Rights, President George Washington declared, October 3, 1789: *"It is the duty of all nations to acknowledge the Providence of Almighty God, to obey His will...and humbly to implore His protection and favor; and Whereas both Houses of Congress have by their joint Committee requested me 'to recommend to the People of the United States a Day of Public Thanksgiving and Prayer to be observed by acknowledging with grateful hearts the many signal favors of Almighty God, especially by affording them an opportunity peaceably to establish a form of government for their safety and happiness'..."*

"I do recommend...the 26th day of November next, to be devoted by the People of these United States to the service of that great and glorious Being, who is the beneficent Author of all the good that was, that is, or that will be; That we may then all unite in rendering unto Him our sincere and humble thanks...for the peaceable and rational manner in which we have been enabled to establish constitutions of government for our safety and happiness, and particularly the national one now lately instituted, for the civil and religious liberty with which we are blessed... Humbly offering our prayers...to the great Lord and Ruler of Nations, and beseech Him to pardon our national and other transgressions."

After the Whiskey Rebellion in western Pennsylvania, President Washington proclaimed a Day of Prayer, January 1, 1796: *"All persons within the United States, to...render sincere and hearty thanks to the great Ruler of nations...particularly for the possession of constitutions of government...and fervently beseech the kind Author of these blessings...to establish habits of*

sobriety, order, and morality and piety.”

During a threatened war with France, President John Adams declared a Day of Fasting, March 23, 1798, then again on March 6, 1799: *“As...the people of the United States are still held in jeopardy by...insidious acts of a foreign nation, as well as by the dissemination among them of those principles subversive to the foundations of all religious, moral, and social obligations...I hereby recommend...a Day of Solemn Humiliation, Fasting and Prayer; That the citizens...call to mind our numerous offenses against the Most High God, confess them before Him with the sincerest penitence, implore His pardoning mercy, through the Great Mediator and Redeemer, for our past transgressions, and that through the grace of His Holy Spirit, we may be disposed and enabled to yield a more suitable obedience to His righteous requisitions... ‘Righteousness exalteth a nation but sin is a reproach to any people.’”*

James Madison, known as the “Chief Architect of the Constitution,” wrote many of the Federalist Papers, convincing the States to ratify the Constitution, and introduced the First Amendment in the first session of Congress. During the War of 1812, President James Madison proclaimed a Day of Prayer, July 9, 1812, stating:

“I do therefore recommend...rendering the Sovereign of the Universe...public homage...acknowledging the transgressions which might justly provoke His divine displeasure...seeking His merciful forgiveness...and with a reverence for the unerring precept of our holy religion, to do to others as they would require that others should do to them.”

On July 23, 1813, Madison issued another Day of Prayer, referring to: *“religion, that gift of Heaven for the good of man.”* When the British marched on Washington, D.C., citizens evacuated, along with President and Dolly Madison. The British burned the White House, Capitol and public buildings on August 25, 1814. Suddenly dark clouds rolled in and a tornado touched down sending debris flying, blowing off roofs and knocking down chimneys on British troops. Two cannons were lifted off the ground and dropped yards away. A British historian wrote: “More British soldiers were killed by this stroke of nature than from all the firearms the American troops had mustered.” British forces then fled and rains extinguished the fires.

James Madison responded by proclaiming, November 16, 1814: *“In the present time of public calamity and war a day may be...observed by the people of the United States as a Day of Public Humiliation and Fasting and of Prayer to Almighty God for the safety and welfare of these States...of confessing their sins and transgressions, and of strengthening their vows of repentance...that He would be graciously pleased to pardon all their offenses.”*

In 1832, as an Asiatic Cholera outbreak gripped New York, Henry Clay asked for a Joint Resolution of Congress to request the President set: *“A Day of Public Humiliation, Prayer and Fasting to be observed by the people of the United States with religious solemnity.”*

On April 13, 1841, when 9th President William Harrison died, President John Tyler issued a Day of Prayer and Fasting: *“When a Christian people feel themselves to be overtaken by a great public calamity, it becomes them to humble themselves under the dispensation of Divine Providence.”*

On July 3, 1849, during a cholera epidemic, President Zachary Taylor proclaimed: *“The providence of God has manifested itself in the visitation of a fearful pestilence which is spreading itself throughout the land, it is fitting that a people whose reliance has ever been in His protection should humble themselves before His throne...acknowledging past transgressions, ask a*

continuance of the Divine mercy. It is earnestly recommended that the first Friday in August be observed throughout the United States as a Day of Fasting, Humiliation and Prayer."

On December 14, 1860, President James Buchanan issued a Proclamation of a National Day of Humiliation, Fasting and Prayer: *"In this the hour of our calamity and peril to whom shall we resort for relief but to the God of our fathers? His omnipotent arm only can save us from the awful effects of our own crimes and follies...Let us...unite in humbling ourselves before the Most High, in confessing our individual and national sins...Let me invoke every individual, in whatever sphere of life he may be placed, to feel a personal responsibility to God and his country for keeping this day holy."*

On August 12, 1861, after the Union lost the Battle of Bull Run, President Abraham Lincoln proclaimed: *"It is fit...to acknowledge and revere the Supreme Government of God; to bow in humble submission to His chastisement; to confess and deplore their sins and transgressions in the full conviction that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom...Therefore I, Abraham Lincoln...do appoint the last Thursday in September next as a Day of Humiliation, Prayer and Fasting for all the people of the nation."*

On March 30, 1863, President Abraham Lincoln proclaimed a National Day of Humiliation, Fasting and Prayer: *"The awful calamity of civil war...may be but a punishment inflicted upon us for our presumptuous sins to the needful end of our national reformation as a whole people...We have forgotten God...We have vainly imagined, in the deceitfulness of our hearts, that all these blessings were produced by some superior wisdom and virtue of our own. Intoxicated with unbroken success, we have become...too proud to pray to the God that made us! It behooves us then to humble ourselves before the offended Power, to confess our national sins."*

After Lincoln was shot, President Johnson issued, April 29, 1865: *"The 25th day of next month was recommended as a Day for Special Humiliation and Prayer in consequence of the assassination of Abraham Lincoln...but Whereas my attention has since been called to the fact that the day aforesaid is sacred to large numbers of Christians as one of rejoicing for the ascension of the Savior: Now...I, Andrew Johnson, President of the United States, do suggest that the religious services recommended as aforesaid should be postponed until...the 1st day of June."*

During World War I, President Wilson proclaimed May 11, 1918: *"It being the duty peculiarly incumbent in a time of war humbly and devoutly to acknowledge our dependence on Almighty God and to implore His aid and protection...I, Woodrow Wilson...proclaim...a Day of Public Humiliation, Prayer and Fasting, and do exhort my fellow-citizens...to pray Almighty God that He may forgive our sins."*

During World War II, Franklin D. Roosevelt prayed during the D-Day invasion of Normandy, June 6, 1944: *"Almighty God, our sons, pride of our nation, this day have set upon a mighty endeavor, a struggle to preserve our Republic, our Religion and our Civilization, and to set free a suffering humanity...Help us, Almighty God, to rededicate ourselves in renewed faith in Thee in this hour of great sacrifice."*

When WWII ended, President Truman declared in a Day of Prayer, August 16, 1945: *"The warlords of Japan...have surrendered unconditionally... This is the end of the...schemes of dictators to enslave the peoples of the world...Our global victory...has come with the help of God...Let us...dedicate ourselves to follow in His ways."*

In 1952, President Truman made the National Day of Prayer an annual observance, stating: *"In*

times of national crisis when we are striving to strengthen the foundations of peace...we stand in special need of Divine support."

In April of 1970, President Richard Nixon had the nation observe a Day of Prayer for Apollo 13 astronauts.

On May 5, 1988, President Reagan made the National Day of Prayer the first Thursday in May, saying: *"Americans in every generation have turned to their Maker in prayer...We have acknowledged...our dependence on Almighty God."*

President George W. Bush declared Days of Prayer after the Islamic terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and after Hurricane Katrina.

As America faces challenges in the economy, from terrorism and natural disasters, one can gain inspiring faith from leaders of the past.