

## Thanksgiving Dinner During the Revolution

*From Sharon, Connecticut comes this account of what a Thanksgiving dinner was like in Litchfield County during the War of Independence. Even more interesting to the residents of Colebrook, this account, written as a letter and then copied into her diary by the daughter of a local minister to her cousin, was written in 1779, the very year Colebrook became a member of the community of Connecticut townships. Well-written accounts such as this are extremely rare; few were written and fewer still have survived.*

“When Thanksgiving Day was approaching, our dear Grandmother Smith, who is sometimes a little desponding of spirit as you well know, did her best to persuade us that it would be better to make it a Day of Fasting & Prayer in view of the wickedness of our friends & vileness of our enemies, I am sure you can hear Grandmother say that and see her shake her cap border. But indeed there was some occasion for her remarks; for our resistance to an *unjust Authority* has cost our beautiful coast towns very dear the last year & all of us have had much to suffer. But my dear father brought her to a more proper frame of mind, so that by the time the day came she was ready to enjoy it almost as well as Grandmother Worthington did, and she, you will remember, always sees the bright side. In the mean while we had all of us been working hard to get all things in readiness to do honor to the day.”

“This year it was uncle Simeon’s turn to have the dinner at his house, but of course we all helped them as they help us when it is our turn, and there is always enough for us all to do. All the baking of pies and cakes was done at our house and we had the big oven heated and filled twice each day for three days before it was all done. And everything was good, though we did have to do without some things that ought to be used. Neither love nor money could buy raisins, but our good red cherries, dried without pits, did almost as well, and happily Uncle Simeon still had some spices in store. The tables were set in the dining hall and even that big room [30x22] had no space to spare when we were all seated. The servants had enough ado to get around the tables and serve us all without oversetting things. There were our two Grandmothers side by side. There are always handsome old ladies, but now, many thought, they were handsomer than ever, and happy they were to look around upon so many of their descendants. Uncle and Aunt Simeon presided at one table, and father and mother at the other. Besides us five boys and girls there were two of the Gales and three Elmers, besides James Browne and Ephraim Cowles. (Five of the last named seven were orphans taught and in all ways provided for by Parson and Mrs. Smith.) We had them at our table because they could be best supervised there. Most of the students had gone to their own homes for the week, but Mr. Skiff & Mr. \_\_\_ [name illegible] were too far away from their homes. They sat at Uncle Simeon’s table & so did Uncle Paul & his family, five of them in all, & Cousins Phineas & Apollos Smith. Then there were six of the Livingston family next door. They had never seen a Thanksgiving dinner before, having been used to keep Christmas Day instead, as is the wont in New York Province. Then there were four old ladies who have no longer homes or children of their own & so came to us. They were invited by my mother, but uncle and aunt Simeon wished it so.”

“Of course we could have no roast beef. None of us have tasted beef this three years back as it all must go to the army, & too little they get, poor fellows. But, Nayquittymaw’s hunters were able to get us a fine red deer, so that we had a good haunch

of venison on each table.” *[We know from the ledger book of the iron operation in Salisbury that the local Indians supplied deerskins to the company store to be made into aprons for the ironworkers. One of Ethan Allen’s brothers was the middleman between the Indians and the ironworkers. Several thousand skins each year were supplied. The meat was actually a by-product of the harvest.]* These were balanced by huge chine *[A chine is described as the whole or a piece of the backbone of an animal with adjoining parts cut for cooking.]* of roast pork at the other ends of the tables. Then there was on one a big roast turkey & on the other a goose, & two big pigeon pasties. Then there was an abundance of good vegetables of all the old sorts & one that I do not believe you have yet seen. Uncle Simeon had imported the seed from England just before the war began & only this year was there enough for table use. It is called sellery *[celery]* & you eat it without cooking. It is very good and served with meats. Next year uncle Simeon says he will be able to raise enough to give us all some. It has to be taken up, roots & all & buried in earth in the cellar through the winter & only pulling up some when you want it to use.”

“Our mince pies were good, although we had to use dried cherries as I told you, & the meat was shoulder of venison instead of beef. The pumpkin pies, apple tarts & big Indian puddings lacked for nothing save appetite by the time we had got around to them.”

“Of course we had no wine. Uncle Simeon has still a cask or two, but it must all be saved for the sick, & indeed for those who are well, good cider is a sufficient substitute. There was no plum pudding, but a boiled suet pudding, stirred thick with dried plums & cherries, was called by the old name & answered the purpose. All the other spice had been used in the mince pies, so for this pudding we used a jar of West India preserved ginger, which chanced to be left of the last shipment which uncle Simeon had from there. We chopped the ginger small and stirred it through with the plums & cherries. It was extraordinary good. The day was bitter cold & when we got home from meeting, which Father did not keep over long by reason of the cold, we were glad enough of the fire in Uncle’s dining hall, but by the time the dinner was one half over, those of us who were on the fire side of one table was forced to get up & carry our plates with us around to the far side of the other table, while those who had sat there were glad to bring their plates around to the fire side to get warm. All but the old ladies, who had a screen put behind their chairs.”

“Uncle Simeon was in his best mood, and you know how good that is! He kept both tables in a roar of laughter with his droll stories of the days when he was studying medicine in Edinborough & afterwards he & father & uncle Paul joined in singing hymns & ballads, after which we all got around the fire as close as we could & cracked nuts, sang old songs & told stories. At least some told stories & others listened. Nobody can exceed the two grandmothers at telling tales of all the things they have seen & repeating those of the early years in New England, & even some in Old England, which they had heard in their youth from their Elders. My father says it is a goodly custom to hand down all worthy deeds & traditions from father to son, because the spoken word is remembered longer than the one that is written.”