

Patriotic Manhattan synagogue has celebrated Thanksgiving since 1789

By [Jon Levine](#)

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Ritual director Zachary Edinger holds up a torah topped with liberty bells used on Thanksgiving at the Congregation Shearith Israel. Helayne Seidman for NY Post

A patriotic Upper West Side synagogue whose leaders fought with George Washington has been celebrating Thanksgiving since the first president proclaimed it a national holiday in 1789.

As a modern and secular holiday, Thanksgiving celebrations are rare in Jewish houses of worship — but that is not the case at Shearith Israel, America’s first Jewish congregation.

On Thanksgiving day, the temple will feature a special holiday-themed liturgy, followed by an address by Rabbi Meir Soloveichik and readings from a Torah adorned with Liberty Bells. An English prayer wishing good health and fortune on the president, vice president, governor, and other elected officials has been recited for two centuries. There’s no turkey at the morning gathering, but ample hot chocolate for parade watchers.

The congregation was organized in 1654 by Sephardic Jews fleeing the inquisition in Portuguese-ruled Brazil, and the members of the synagogue at 2 West 70th St. take pride in being not just the oldest Jewish congregation in the United States but eyewitnesses to American history.



A 1940s Thanksgiving prayer booklet. The holiday service features special Thanksgiving liturgy. Helayne Seidman for NY Post

“We were around when it was a Dutch colony, and the establishment of the United States of America, and the very first Thanksgiving,” Barbara Reiss, executive director of the synagogue, told The Post. “We felt it was important enough to incorporate that into our service and our prayers from the get go as a day of thanks as American Jews.”

The roots of the Thanksgiving celebration stem from Gershom Mendes Seixas, the temple’s hazzan and first American-born leader of the congregation. He was a devoted patriot of the American Revolution.

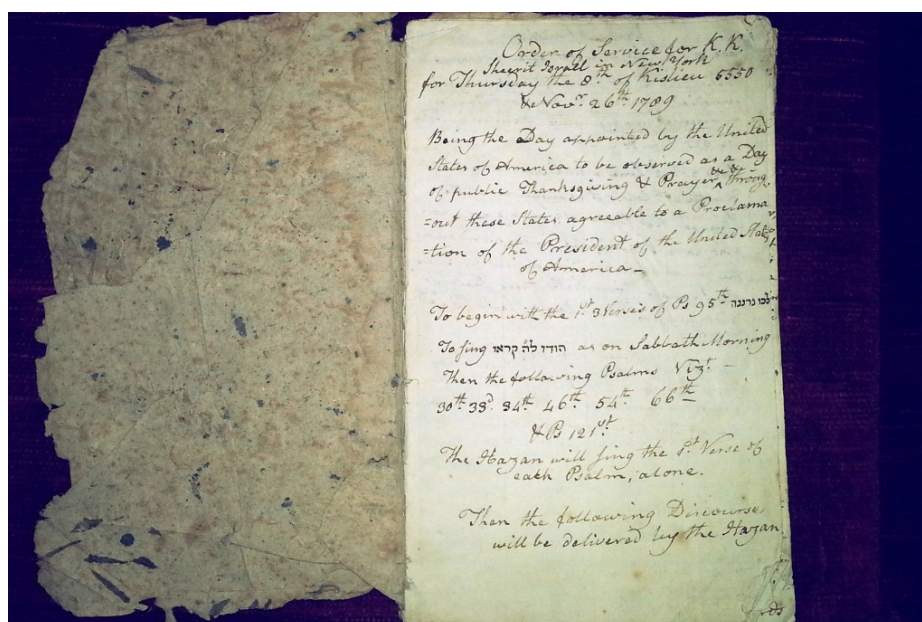


The congregation meets at a Greek Revival structure near Central Park, designed in part by Louis Comfort Tiffany. Helayne Seidman for NY Post

When the British conquered Manhattan in 1776, Seixas and his fellow worshippers fled to Connecticut. The synagogue, then located at 26 South William St., was ransacked by Hessian mercenaries. The remains of torahs they desecrated still remain in the synagogue's archives. Today the location is home to a Luke's Lobster.

Many early congregants served in the Continental Army. Around 20 Revolutionary War veterans are buried at the synagogue's ancient Chatham Square Cemetery in Chinatown.

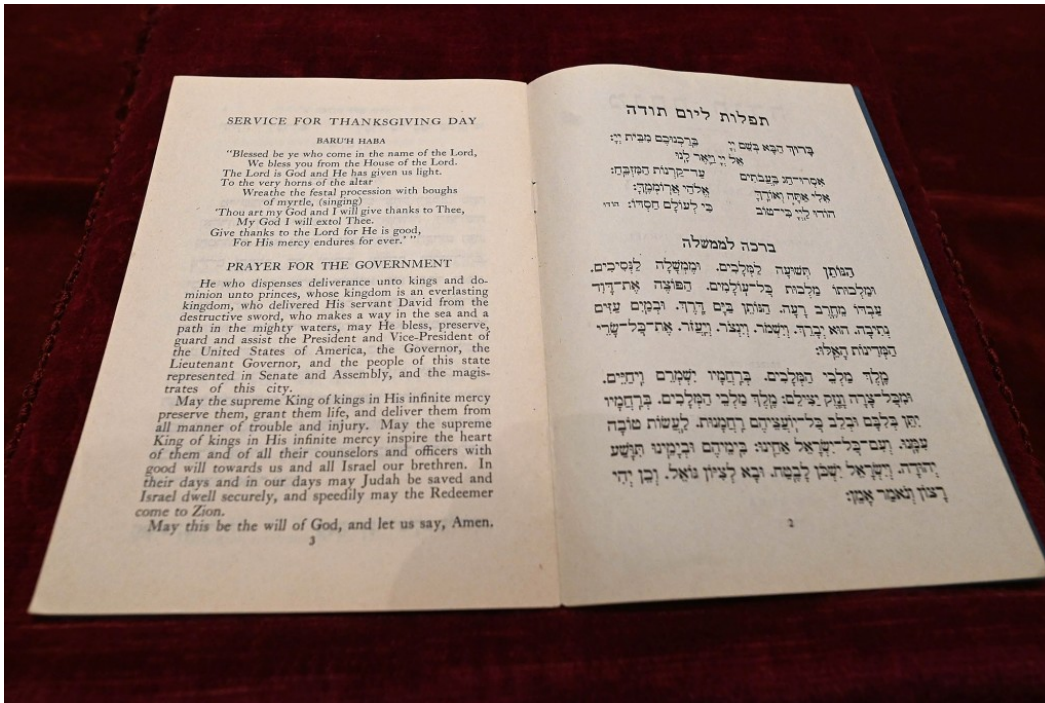
After the colonies' triumph, Seixas returned to New York and was among a few selected clergymen invited to participate in George Washington's inaugural celebration.



The first page of the order of service written by Gershom Mendes Seixas in 1789. Congregation Shearith Israel

"When in 1789 George Washington declared the first Thanksgiving [Seixas] was all on board," Zachariah Edinger, the congregation's sexton and a fifth-generation member, told The Post.

The congregation has occupied a massive Greek revival building off Central Park since 1897. The structure was designed in part by Louis Comfort Tiffany and his namesake stained glass surrounds the sanctuary.



More pages from the 1940 Thanksgiving booklet. Today, the congregation uses the holiday as an opportunity to give back. Helayne Seidman for NY Post

Today, the congregation also uses the holiday as an opportunity to give back to the local community and regularly sponsors a “pack-a-thon” with other houses of worship to deliver food to the needy.

“Thanksgiving means something to this congregation and being American means something to this congregation,” Edinger said. “We don’t give it lip service. We really feel it.”