

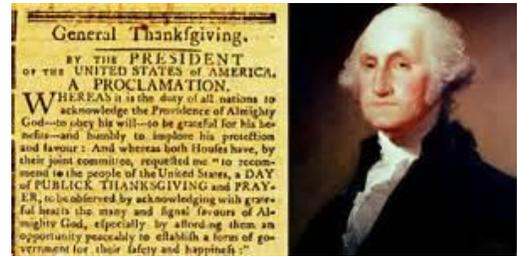
Today In Our History

How Thanksgiving Became a Tradition

What does September 28 and December 26 have to do with Thanksgiving?

George Washington was the first President of the United States. He was also the first of three Presidents to consider a Thanksgiving holiday in the United States, more than one hundred years after the Pilgrims celebrated their first harvest in Plymouth Colony in the early fall of 1621.

On **September 28, 1789**, the first Federal Congress passed a resolution asking that the President of the United States recommend to a national day of thanksgiving. Soon after the recommendation, President George Washington issued a proclamation naming Thursday, November 26, 1789, as a *Day of Publick Thanksgiving and Prayer*, the first Thanksgiving celebrated under the new Constitution. However, some states observed the day, many did not; and that was the end of that!



George Washington's 1789 Thanksgiving proclamation



Sarah Josepha Buell Hale

Sarah Josepha Buell was born in New Hampshire in 1788. She was schooled in the classics while being educated at home by her mother and college graduate brother. When she was 18, she taught at a private school, later married David Hale and lived a comfortable life with their five children. After nine years of marriage, she was widowed with children to support; her oldest child was seven and the youngest was two weeks old. She relied upon her background in literature as the best way of supporting her family. By 1823, she had published a small book of poems, *The Genius of Oblivion*. She continued to write poetry, and in 1830, her second book of poems, *Poems for Our Children*, contained her most famous piece, "Mary Had a Little Lamb". In 1841, she published *The Good Housekeeper* and then became editor of *Godey's Lady's Book*, which was nicknamed, "Book of the Nation" because of Sarah Hale's focus on the skills of American women.

For decades Sarah J. Hale wrote very interesting essays for publishing. In 1847, she began writing articles in a one-woman campaign for a national day of Thanksgiving. After pursuing her written crusade for more than *fifteen* years, she tried a brand new strategy; she wrote a letter to someone who was very influential.

On **September 28, 1863**, 74 years after President Washington's "Day of Publick Thanksgiving and Prayer" was proclaimed, Sarah Hale wrote a letter to President Abraham Lincoln, clearly stating her intent: "This subject is to have the day of our annual Thanksgiving made a national and fixed union festival." In this letter to Lincoln



Thanksgiving proclamation by President Lincoln

she revealed that, as editor of *Godey's Lady's Book*, she had been advocating for a national thanksgiving date for fifteen years. In only six days, President Lincoln issued a proclamation urging Americans to observe the last Thursday in November as a day of Thanksgiving.

However, Sarah was still not content. In 1871, at the age of 83, she fought to have a national Thanksgiving Day proclaimed by an act of Congress which would establish

that a Thanksgiving holiday would occur *annually* on the fourth Thursday of November. In 1870, Congress passed a law that adopted Christmas, New Year's Day and the 4th of July as well as Thanksgiving. But the wording for Thanksgiving had not specified an annual date. It wasn't until 1941 that the date of Thanksgiving Day was *finally* established, ninety-four years after her first essays, sixty-two years after Sarah's death.

In 1939, the last Thursday in November fell on the last day of the month, so President Franklin D. Roosevelt issued a proclamation which moved Thanksgiving to the second to last Thursday of November. He was concerned that the shortened Christmas shopping season might affect the recovery from the Great Depression. But the nation opposed this change since calendars weren't correct, school vacations had been planned and even their students' tests had to be rescheduled!



A proclamation by President Franklin Roosevelt in 1941 still celebrates Thanksgiving today

Years before Sarah Hale had begun her decades-long plea for a national day of thanks, she wrote the 1827 book, *Northwood*, her description of a menu for her life-long obsession, a thanksgiving feast! In *Northwood*, she suggested England traditions that we have today:

“And now for our Thanksgiving dinner. The roasted turkey took precedence, being placed at the head of the table ... sending forth the rich odor of its savory stuffing ... plates of pickles, preserves and butter ... yet the pumpkin pie occupied the most distinguished niche.”

In Sarah's 1841 cookbook, *The Good Housekeeper*, she served recipes of meats and sweets. Sarah Hale lived to be 91, dining on recipes such as [Rich Apple Pudding](#).

RICH APPLE PUDDING.—Peel and core six very large apples, stew them in six table-spoonfuls of water, with the rind of a lemon; when soft, beat them to a pulp, add six ounces of good brown sugar, six well-beaten eggs, a pint of rich cream, and a tea-spoonful of lemon juice; line a dish with a puff paste, and when baked, stick all over the top thin chips of candied citron and lemon-peel.

During her lifetime, Sarah Josepha Hale had become a renowned writer, author and supporter of women's efforts to become better homemakers, develop economic independence and to work as overseas missionaries. She also supported various educational institutions and raised funds to save Mount Vernon.

Would we have ever celebrated Thanksgiving without Sarah Josepha Hale? Read more:

<http://writersalmanac.publicradio.org/index.php?date=2002/10/24>

<http://godeysladybook.com/>

<http://www.history.com/news/abraham-lincoln-and-the-mother-of-thanksgiving>

<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=15575>

http://www.pilgrimhallmuseum.org/pdf/Godmother_of_Thanksgiving.pdf

Early American Cookery: The Good Housekeeper 1841 By Sarah Josepha Hale
\$7.95 in paperback

Thank You, Sarah: The Woman Who Saved Thanksgiving By Laurie Halse Anderson

A book for ages 5-8

Sarah Gives Thanks: How Thanksgiving Became a National Holiday By Mike Allegra

A book for ages 6-9

Thanksgiving Officially Returned To Fourth Thursday

WASHINGTON — (AP) — It's legal now—Thanksgiving on the fourth Thursday of November. President Roosevelt, who switched the date twice from the traditional fourth to the third Thursday of the month, signed into law yesterday a bill "freezing" the date for future years.