

History of Thanksgiving Timeline

1620 The Original Pilgrim party of 102 adults and about 30 children comes ashore in Cape Cod, Massachusetts on November 9 after storms prevent them from reaching Virginia. 55 adults survive the 1st winter. With the help of Squanto, a member of the Pawtuxent tribe, they plant native crops and survive their 1st year.

1621 The Plymouth colony survivors celebrate their first harvest over several days in a Thanksgiving festival. Massasoit, chief of the Wampanoag, and 90 of his tribe join them. The meal likely included duck and other wild fowl, venison, assorted seafood, onions, Indian corn, nuts, squash, carrots and pumpkin.

1777 General George Washington declares December 18 a day “for solemn Thanksgiving and praise” to mark recent victories against the British in the Revolutionary War.

1789 President George Washington issues a presidential proclamation declaring a national Thanksgiving Day on the fourth Thursday in November:

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 and signal favors of Almighty God.... That we 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 more lately instituted; for civil and religious liberty with which we are blessed....

1827 Sarah Josepha Hale publishes *Northwood*, a anti-slavery novel in which she provides a thorough description of “a good and true Yankee Thanksgiving” feast. It includes among other items roasted turkey, savory stuffing and pumpkin pie which “*occupied the most distinguished niche.*”

It is”.... an appropriate tribute of gratitude to God to set apart one day of Thanksgiving in each year; and autumn is the time when the overflowing garners of America call for this expression of joyful gratitude.”

1835 Sarah Josepha Hale publishes “The Thanksgiving of the Heart” in a collection of short stories. “*Our good ancestors were wise, even in their mirth. We have a standing proof of this in the season they chose for the celebration of our annual festival, the Thanksgiving. The funeral-faced month of November is thus made to wear a garland of joy...*”

1837 Sarah Josepha Hale begins in earnest her thirty-eight year campaign to establish Thanksgiving as a permanent national holiday. She will write hundreds of letters to senators, governors and five presidents. Her best forum is as the newly appointed editor of Godey’s Lady’s Book, a woman’s magazine that becomes the most widely circulated woman’s magazine in America under her leadership. Subscriptions increase from 25,000 to 150,000. The widowed mother of five young children publishes the first of forty Thanksgiving directed editorials she’ll write until 1875. She suggests that Thanksgiving should

“....be observed on the same day of November, say the last Thursday in the month, throughout all New England; and also in our sister states.... It would then have a national character, which would, eventually, induce all the states to join in the commemoration of “In-gathering,” which it celebrates. It is a festival which will never become obsolete, for it cherishes the best affections of the heart – the social and domestic ties. It calls together the dispersed members of the family circle, and brings plenty, joy and gladness to the dwellings of the poor and lowly.”

1841 Alexander Young, a New England historian, describes the “first thanksgiving” after he finds a letter written by Edward Winslow, a 1620 colonist, referencing the 1621 harvest.

1847 Sarah Josepha Hale notes that the Governor of New Hampshire has established November 25th as the state’s annual Thanksgiving holiday. She hopes the other 29 states will do the same. *“Then the whole land would rejoice at once.”*

1848 Ms. Hale reports that 24 of 29 states kept the last Thursday of November as a state Thanksgiving day in 1847 in one of her two Thanksgiving editorials that year,. But she’s not satisfied. She wants *every* state to declare it a holiday and she wants it to be the *same* day throughout the nation.

As the years pass and the nation moves toward civil war, Ms Hale presents her arguments more urgently with religious, civic, political and social themes frequently interwoven.

1851 *“The last Thursday in November has these advantages -- harvests of all kinds are gathered in -- summer travellers have returned to their homes -- the diseases that, during summer and early autumn, often afflict some portions of our country, have ceased, and all are prepared to enjoy a day of Thanksgiving.”*

1852 *“THE FOURTH OF JULY is the exponent of independence and civil freedom. THANKSGIVING DAY is the national pledge of Christian faith in God, acknowledging him as the dispenser of blessings. These two festivals should be joyfully and universally observed throughout our whole country, and thus incorporated in our habits of thought as inseparable from American life.”*

1854 *“...it would be better to have the day so fixed by the expression of public sentiment that no discord would be possible, but, from Maine to Mexico, from Plymouth Rock to Sunset Sea, the hymn of thanksgiving should be simultaneously raised, as the pledge of brotherhood in the enjoyment of God’s blessings during the year.”*

1860 *“Everything that contributes to bind us in one vast empire together, to quicken the sympathy that makes us feel from the icy North to the sunny South that we are one family, each a member of a great and free Nation, not merely the unit of a remote locality, is worthy of being cherished. We have sought to reawaken and increase this sympathy, believing that the fine filaments of the affections are stronger than laws to keep the Union of our States sacred in the hearts of our people... We believe our Thanksgiving Day, if fixed and perpetuated, will be a great and sanctifying promoter of this national spirit.”*

1863 Ms Hale returns to a global theme

In 1859 thirty States and three Territories held the Thanksgiving Festival on the same day the last Thursday in November. It was also celebrated that year and the following on board several of the American fleets ships in the Indian Ocean, the Mediterranean, and on the Brazil station; by the Americans in Berlin at our Prussian Embassy; in Paris and in Switzerland; and American missionaries have signified their readiness to unite in this Festival if it should be established on a particular day which can be known as the American Thanksgiving.

August 6 President Abraham Lincoln declares a day of Thanksgiving after the Civil War battles at Vicksburg and Gettysburg.

September 28 Sarah Josepha Hale writes a letter to President Lincoln:

“As the President of the United States has the power of appointments for the District of Columbia and the Territories; also for the Army and Navy and all American citizens abroad who claim protection from the U. S. Flag -- could he not, with right as well as duty, issue his proclamation for a Day of National Thanksgiving for all the above classes of persons? And would it not be fitting and patriotic for him to appeal to the Governors of all the States, inviting and commending these to unite in issuing

proclamations for the last Thursday in November as the Day of Thanksgiving for the people of each State? Thus the great Union Festival of America would be established.”

October 3 Lincoln declares the last Thursday of November as national Thanksgiving Day.

“...to set apart and observe the last Thursday of November next as a day of thanksgiving and praise to our beneficent Father who dwelleth in the heavens.... and fervently implore the interposition of the Almighty hand to heal the wounds of the nation and to restore if, as soon as may be consistent with the divine purpose, to the full enjoyment of peace, harmony, tranquillity, and union.

1866 *“Every reader who knows what Thanksgiving is, and has spent one at home after a few years’ absence, can bear witness to the beautiful, romantic, touching incidents and associations of that hallowed family time. Sooner or later these lovable aspects of our Thanksgiving-day will give birth to original species of American poetry, essay, and story-telling.”*

1875 Sara Josepha Hale writes her last Thanksgiving editorial in Godey’s Lady’s Book. It is no longer the most widely read women’s magazine in America and will be sold in two years. *“How shall we best call out and sustain this living patriotism in our wide land? It must be done by the establishment throughout the country of national customs and institutions, and especially by the celebration of those national feasts of brotherhood and goodwill which will bind our history together, and cause our forty States to feel as one. We must make at least one month in the twelve, and one day of that month the festival of the nation. Our National Thanksgiving must be made a legal holiday for the people of America.”*

1924 The first Macy’s Parade on Thanksgiving Day launches the Christmas shopping season. Run by Macy’s employees it uses Central Park Zoo animals, celebrates America and is inspired by the festivals many of the employees remember as first generation immigrants. Giant hot air balloons debut in 1927. Snoopy is the most popular hot air balloon character with six appearances over the years.

1934 The Detroit Lions play the Chicago Bears in front of 26,000 fans in Detroit on Thanksgiving Day. For the first time, a football game is broadcast by NBC radio on ninety-four stations around the country. Started as a publicity stunt, it sells out two weeks in advance and is an instant national success.

1939 Under pressure from the National Retail Association, President Franklin Roosevelt moves Thanksgiving to the next-to-last Thursday in November to extend the Christmas shopping season as the nation struggles to recover from the Great Depression.

1941 Seventy years after Sarah Josepha Hale first proposes it in 1871, congress passes legislation to establish Thanksgiving Day as the fourth Thursday of November. President Roosevelt signs it into law. No longer subject to the whims of Presidents and governors, Thanksgiving has become a permanent fixture in our national calendar.

1956 The Detroit Lions annual Thanksgiving Day game is televised for the 1st time.