



## Did Lincoln Start Thanksgiving?



### An American Tradition

It is late November. A few stubborn leaves still cling to their branches. We gather with our families around the dining room table. The turkey is carved, the cranberry sauce and sweet potatoes are passed around, the smell of pumpkin pie fills the air. There are parades and football games on the television. We gather and give thanks for all we have, with family and friends. How did we reach this Thanksgiving Day tradition? How did we get from traditional harvest celebrations to eating turkey and watching football? Is Mr. Lincoln responsible?

### President Lincoln Issues A Proclamation

In July 1863, the Battle of Gettysburg resulted in more than 50,000 American casualties. Despite these losses, the United States gained a great victory during these three days. On October 3, 1863, with this victory in mind, as well as its cost, President Lincoln issued a proclamation.

The proclamation called on the American people to, “set apart and observe the last Thursday of November next, as a day of Thanksgiving and Praise...” Lincoln instructed the nation to offer, “penitence for our national perverseness and disobedience...” This line reminded the country of the sins of slavery and war.

This proclamation of October 1863 is viewed as the beginning of the national holiday of Thanksgiving Day. It was one of nine similar proclamations that Mr. Lincoln issued during the Civil War. Mr. Lincoln issued the proclamation, but he did not author it. Secretary of State William Seward penned the October 1863 proclamation.

Who deserves credit for making Thanksgiving Day a national holiday? Do we need to assign the credit to one person? If so, is it Mr. Lincoln? Is it Mr. Seward? Or is it a 19th-century business woman?

### Sarah Josepha Hale

President Lincoln’s proclamation may have never been issued had it not been for Sarah Josepha Hale.

Mrs. Hale is known for her work as editor of *Godey’s Lady’s Book*, and as the author of *Mary Had a Little Lamb*. She also played a role in creating the annual national holiday of Thanksgiving Day.

In 1827, as editor of *Boston’s Ladies’ Magazine*, she began to write essays calling for the national holiday. In 1846, as editor of *Godey’s Lady’s Book*, Mrs. Hale launched a letter-writing campaign to support her cause. Finally on September 28, 1863, she wrote directly to President Lincoln, asking him to use his powers to create the holiday. Her 36-year quest was finally fulfilled.

### What About The Pilgrims?

Most elementary-level students are familiar with the story of the “First Thanksgiving.” They learn that the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock in 1620. To celebrate their first harvest they held a feast, with the Wampanoag Indians, who had helped them adapt and survive.

The Pilgrim’s Thanksgiving in 1621 was really just a continuation of a tradition they had experienced in Europe. In most agricultural societies it has been common throughout history to hold feasts and ceremonies during the time of the harvest.

The “First Thanksgiving” in the Americas may have actually taken place between Francisco Vásquez de Coronado and the Teya Indians at Palo Duro Canyon (Texas) on May 23, 1541.



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## Father Abraham

It can be said that his life embodied the “American Dream.” His story has been told countless times, through books, movies, still images, and the spoken word. With all the attention given to Mr. Lincoln’s life, it sometimes becomes hard to distinguish fact from fiction.

Some have tried to not only give Mr. Lincoln credit for creating Thanksgiving Day, but also the distinction of being the first President to pardon a turkey reserved for Thanksgiving Day dinner. Mr. Lincoln did pardon a turkey. It was Tad Lincoln’s

turkey Jack, but it was slated for Christmas dinner, not Thanksgiving dinner.

What was Lincoln’s role in creating our modern Thanksgiving Day? He issued nine proclamations while in office calling for days of thanksgiving. A few Presidents had issued similar proclamations before Mr. Lincoln, but it was not done consistently. Every year since Mr. Lincoln’s proclamation of 1863, the United States has celebrated Thanksgiving Day. It is for this reason that Mr. Lincoln receives the credit.

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## Notable Dates In Thanksgiving History

1541: Francisco Vásquez de Coronado and the Teya Indians hold a feast in Palo Duro Canyon (Texas).

1621: The Pilgrims and the Wampanoag Indians hold a feast at Plymouth Colony (Massachusetts).

1777: All 13 Colonies hold thanksgiving celebrations.

1789: President George Washington declares November 26th a national day of thanksgiving.

1815: President James Madison declares a national day of prayer and thanksgiving.

1827: Sarah Josepha Hale writes essays calling for an annual national celebration of thanksgiving.

1846: Mrs. Hale conducts a letter-writing campaign to make the last Thursday of November a national day of thanksgiving.

1863: President Lincoln issues a proclamation calling for the last Thursday of November to be set aside as a day of “Thanksgiving and Praise.”

1920: The first Thanksgiving Day parade is held in Philadelphia. The event is sponsored by Gimbel Brothers Department Store.

1922: The National Football League plays its first games on Thanksgiving Day. The day’s winners included the Buffalo All-Americans, the Chicago Cardinals, the Racine Legion, the Columbus Panhandles, and the Canton Bulldogs.

1924: The first Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade is held in New York City. The parade’s giant balloons debut three years later.

1941: After altering the date of Thanksgiving Day in 1939, President Franklin Roosevelt reestablishes the fourth Thursday of November as Thanksgiving Day.

1947: President Harry Truman becomes the first President to officially pardon a turkey that is marked for Thanksgiving Day dinner at the White House.



1956: The National Football League’s Thanksgiving Day football game is televised for the first time. The Green Bay Packers defeated the Detroit Lions, 24-20.

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