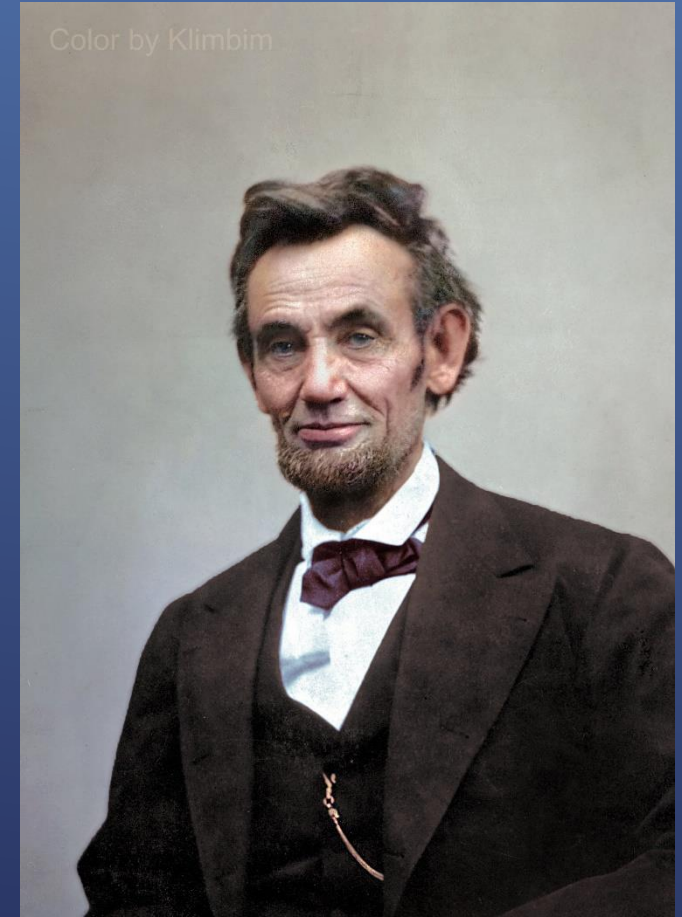
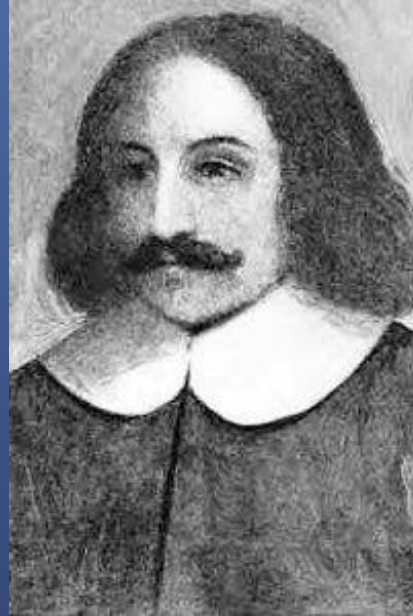


How the Civil War forged the modern American Thanksgiving



What is Thanksgiving?

thanksgiving - “the act of saying or showing that you are grateful, especially to God.”

Thanksgiving – “a national holiday on the fourth Thursday in November in the U.S.... when families get together for a big meal and express their appreciation for life, health, etc.”

Source Cambridge English Dictionary

In a sense the Pilgrim's thanksgiving was not "Thanksgiving"

Celebrated in September or October of 1621, the first thanksgiving was not regarded by the Pilgrims as a thanksgiving of spiritual devotion, but instead more of a traditional English harvest festival according to Pilgrim Edward Winslow.

Pilgrim Governor William Bradford ordered the hunting of geese and ducks for the feast. He also recounted that there was a good supply of turkey.

More than twice as many Pokankets/Wampanoags (approximately 90) attended the celebration than Pilgrims and they stayed for three days.



Challenge Question One – what was biggest meat dish served and dearly enjoyed at the original Thanksgiving?

Venison – the Wampanoags brought five deer to the feast



But in a larger sense this feast was a Thanksgiving marking the Pilgrim's surviving a year of severe adversity

The Pilgrims endured a perilous 66 day Transatlantic crossing landing in a strange place.

During the first Winter of the settlement only 44 of the original 104 Mayflower passengers had survived.

The Pilgrims had risked military action to secure the stability of their key ally, Massasoit's rule.

Yet by the successful harvest season of 1621 the Pilgrims had survived these tremendous ordeals and had emerged more united than ever – among themselves and their Native American allies.

So this first major harvest feast - intentionally, or not - represented a moment when a community had surmounted existential crises – setting a precedent for future times in American history.

Wait, what about all the other, earlier Thanksgivings held by Spanish and other English settlements?

Other states such as Texas, Florida, Virginia and Maine claim to have been the sites of the first Thanksgivings – with some degrees of justification.

But the discovery and promotion of these competing Thanksgiving stories took place long after the modern Thanksgiving holiday was established so they were not really a factor in creating it.



Saint Augustine Thanksgiving
Mass of 1565



Virginia 1619
Thanksgiving



1964 "reenactment" of the
1607 Maine Thanksgiving



Thanksgiving Mass in El
Paso, Texas in 1598

In the years and decades that followed, harvest celebrations and thanksgivings of various forms would continue

In 1623 the Plymouth colony would have another notable harvest feast.

And the decades that followed there would be other harvest festivals and thanksgivings held in communities throughout New England.

However, these celebrations were not commemorations of the 1621 Pilgrim “Thanksgiving.”

These events differed significantly in their timing and nature – some were religiously themed, others were just traditional harvest festivals.

Some thanksgivings were marked by fasting rather than feasting.

But, the memory of the Pilgrim thanksgiving of 1621 had vanished from the public’s memory.

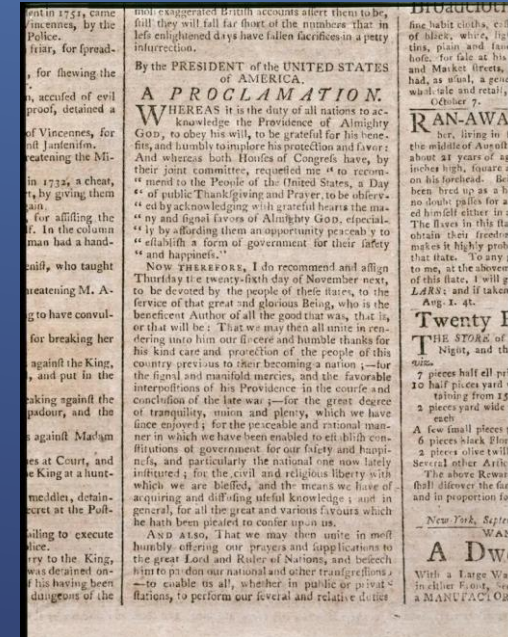


The first President establishes a Thanksgiving precedent

The Continental Congress would declare the first thanksgiving for the independent United States in December 1777 and continue to do so until 1784.

As a result of legislation passed by Congress (opposed by some) the first President of the United States, George Washington on October 3, 1789 formally issued a Thanksgiving Proclamation:

(I) do recommend and assign Thursday the 26th day of November next to be devoted by the People of these States to the service of that great and glorious Being... That we may then all unite in rendering unto Him our sincere and humble thanks...(for) becoming a Nation, for... the favorable interpositions of His providence, which we experienced in the course and conclusion of the late war, for the great degree of tranquility, union, and plenty... in which we have been enabled to establish constitutions of government for our safety and happiness, and particularly the national one now lately instituted, for the civil and religious liberty with which we are blessed; ... which He hath been pleased to confer upon us.



Although the Proclamation lacked the force of law in terms of its implementation, and duration - it was widely accepted

Washington set an example by attending church services on Thanksgiving Day and making a sizable charitable donation to the pastor to be directed toward meeting the needs of the poor.

Other Presidents like Adams, and James Madison also made Thanksgiving proclamations.



Challenge Question Two: One Founding
Father did not like the idea of a Thanksgiving
holiday can you name him?

Thomas Jefferson

He objected to it because of concerns that it might violate the separation of church and state, and states rights.

Some of these points formed the basis for future objections to Thanksgiving.

Therefore, as President he refused to issue a Thanksgiving Proclamation.

Ironically, however, Jefferson as Governor of Virginia had called for “a day of public and solemn thanksgiving and prayer to Almighty God...



Reverence for the Pilgrims would grow in Massachusetts, New England and throughout the North

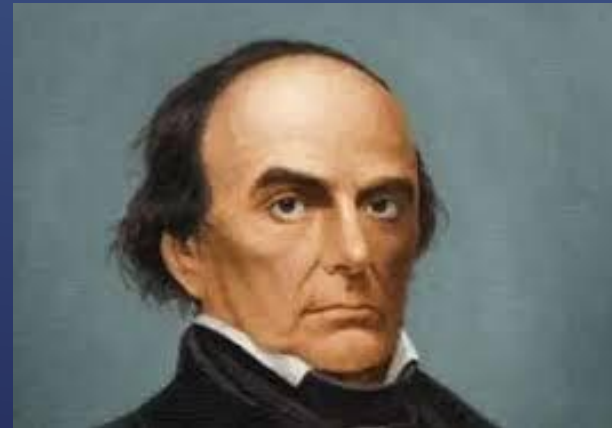
In 1769, Forefathers Day was created by the Old Colony Club of Plymouth, MA and was observed on December 22 each year to mark the landing of the Pilgrims in Plymouth. In 1819, another group, the Pilgrim Society was formed and also observed the day.

The observance of the day gradually extended beyond Plymouth, and by the early 19th Century the event drew in nationally renowned speakers like John Quincy Adams, Daniel Webster and William Seward.

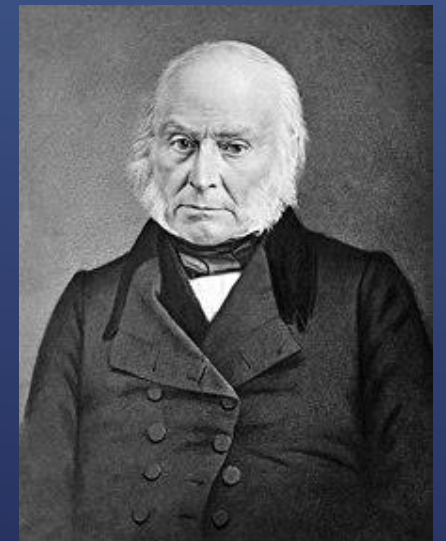
Webster, in particular used his speech in 1820 to promote the idea that the Pilgrims laid the foundations of the American experiment of liberty. He sharply contrasted that noble vision with the evils of slavery.



Old Colony Club of Plymouth



Daniel Webster

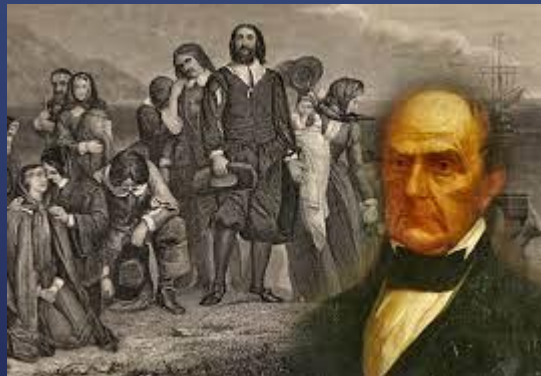


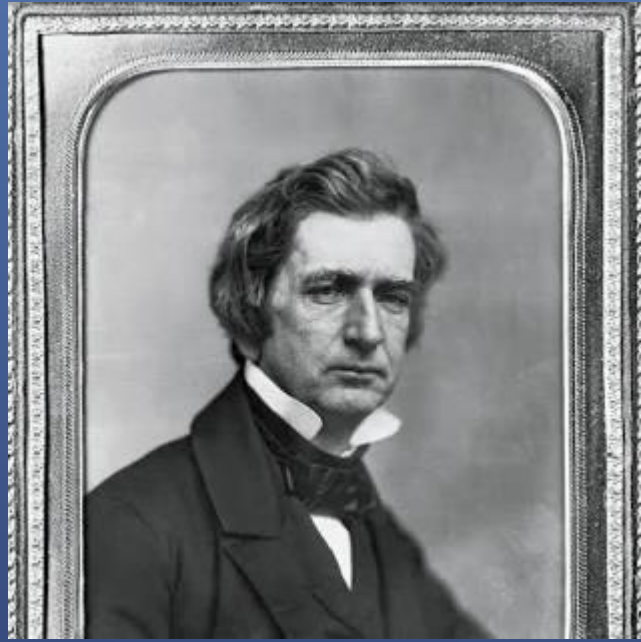
John Quincy Adams

We have come to this Rock, to record here our homage for our Pilgrim Fathers; our sympathy in their sufferings; our gratitude for their labors; our admiration of their virtues; our veneration for their piety; and our attachment to those principles of civil and religious liberty...

I deem it my duty on this occasion to suggest, that the land is not yet wholly free from the contamination of a traffic, at which every feeling of humanity must for ever revolt, - I mean the African slave-trade.

...let us pledge ourselves here, upon the rock of Plymouth, to extirpate and destroy it. It is not fit that the land of the Pilgrims should bear the shame longer.





In 1855, William H. Seward, another opponent of slavery, used his Forefather's Day address to clearly define where the Pilgrim-inspired quest for liberty should lead the nation:

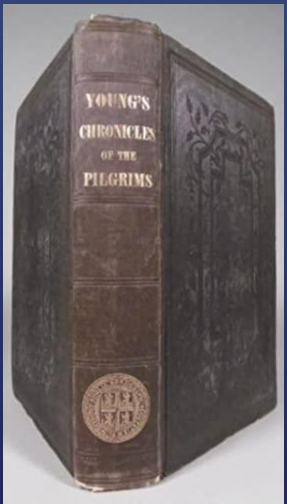
"Political equality is nothing else than the full enjoyment, by every member of the state, of the absolute rights which belong equally to all men."

Mid-18th Century revelations about the 1621 Pilgrim Thanksgiving cause the two movements converge into one

In 1841, the discovery of an obscure reference to the 1621 Pilgrim “Thanksgiving” was found in Edward Winslow’s *The Chronicles of the Pilgrim Fathers*, a collection of original documents from the Pilgrims.

In 1855, William Bradford’s long lost *Of Plymouth Plantation*, was rediscovered. Bradford’s account also mentioned the 1621 Thanksgiving and added more details about the event.

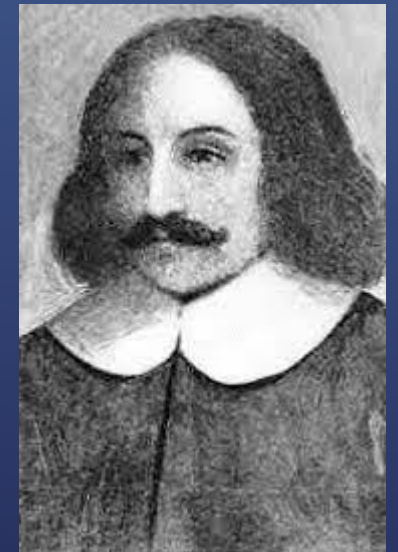
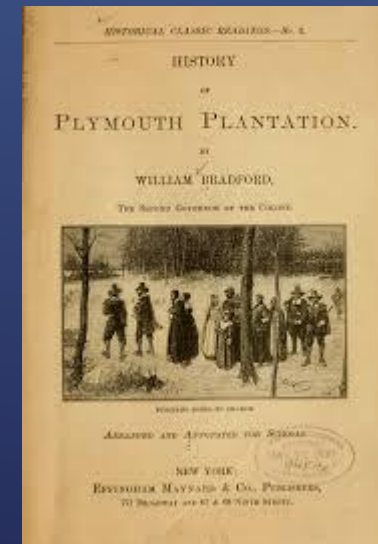
The combined effect of these discoveries was to fuse the Thanksgiving movement with the nation’s growing glorification of the Pilgrim story. Increasingly the Pilgrim 1621 Thanksgiving became the template for the emerging American Thanksgiving celebration.



Edward Winslow



Jennie Augusta Brownscombe’s First Thanksgiving at Christmas



William Bradford

Sarah Josepha Hale - the mother of the modern American Thanksgiving

Born in 1788 in Newport, NH, Hale became one of the most influential figures in early and mid-19th Century America

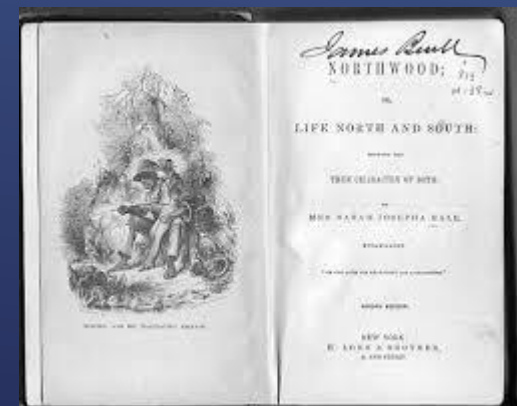
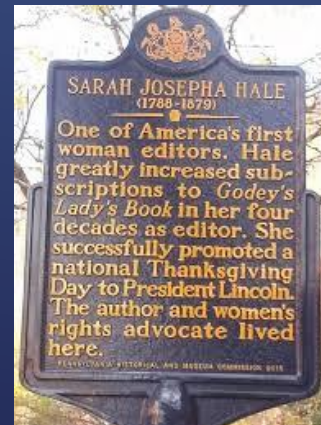
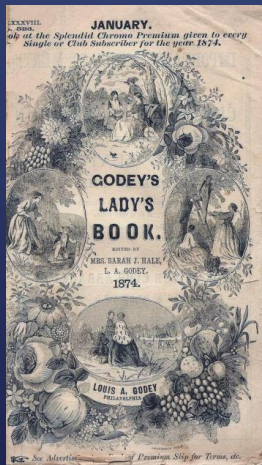
She was a strong advocate for the advancement of women including giving married women equal property rights.

She wrote and edited extensively – authored and edited dozens of published books. One of the most noteworthy is her anti-slavery novel, *Northwood: A Tale of New England*, which would become a best-seller in the U.S. and go on to be published in England.

She authored the poem. “Mary Had a Little Lamb.”

Most importantly, in 1837 she became the editor of Godey’s Ladies Book – one of America’s the most widely circulated and influential publications.

She not only dramatically grows the readership, but recruited many of the greatest writers of the time – including Harriet Beecher Stowe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Washington Irving and Edgar Allan Poe - to contribute their work to the publication.



“This good old Puritan tradition,” Sarah Hale

From 1847 on, Hale used her bully pulpit as the editor of Godey’s Ladies Book to continuously promote the establishment of a national Thanksgiving holiday modeled on the growing perception of the 1621 Pilgrim Thanksgiving.

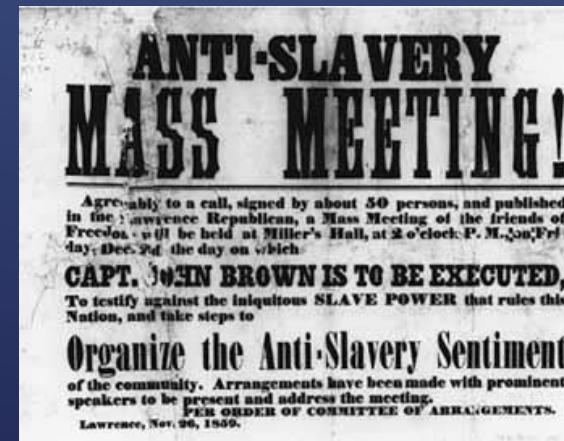
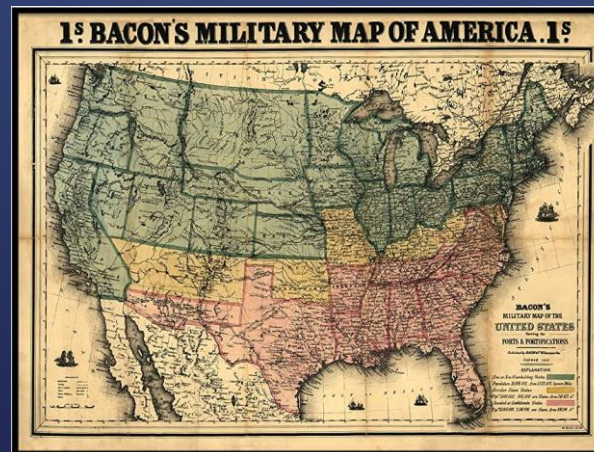
Her campaign included regular articles highlighting “real” and fictional stories of happy Thanksgiving family gatherings.

She also published scores of “traditional” Thanksgiving recipes including those for such dishes as roast turkey, pumpkin pie and potato pudding (the latter two were not actually served by the Pilgrims).

She kept a running yearly total on the growing number of states observing thanksgiving holidays, and the dates they selected.

As signs of an impending Civil War grew near, she increasingly argued that a national Thanksgiving might hold the nation together.

“If all the States and Territories hold their Thanksgiving (on the same day)...there will be a complete moral and social reunion of the *people* of America.. (w)ould this not be a good omen for the perpetual political union of the States?”



Hale also lobbies officials at all levels

Hale never mentions slavery or secession directly either in her Godey's Lady's Book articles, nor in her correspondence.

But Hale ceaselessly wrote the nation's Presidents, senior cabinet members, governors and other officials promoting the adoption of the holiday.

Her lobbying was largely successful, but she met resistance from those concerned over the issues of "states rights" and the perceived link between Thanksgiving and the cause of abolition



Ultimately the growing popularity and adoption of the thanksgiving holidays cannot solve the main problem leading to the Civil War – Slavery

For the four million enslaved Black people Thanksgiving was a paradoxical time.

They were enslaved on a holiday celebrating freedom and the equality of people from different backgrounds.

Nevertheless, most enslaved Blacks tried to celebrate in their own way, mixing their own traditions and foods with European ones.

Enslaved and freed Blacks contributed many dishes to the traditional American Thanksgiving meal, including macaroni and cheese and sweet potato pie.

At the same time, there are accounts of thanksgivings being used by many enslaved Blacks as a time to try to escape to freedom.



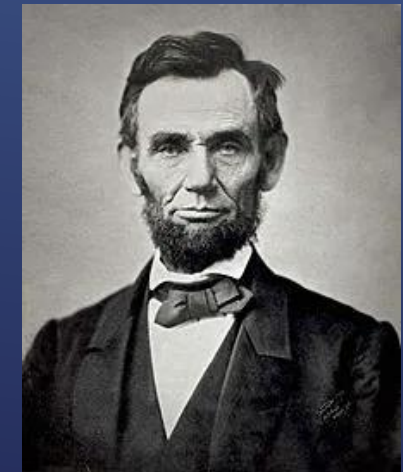
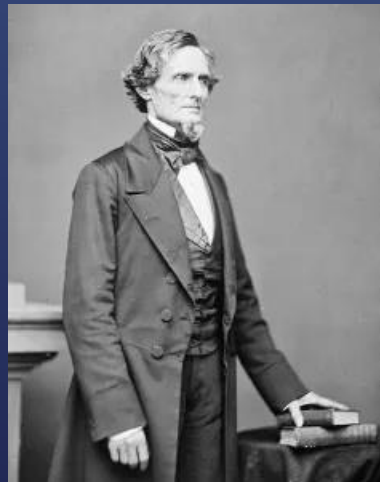
War erupts and the Union and Confederacy issue dueling thanksgiving proclamations

From the outset of the Civil War both Union President Abraham Lincoln and Confederate President Jefferson Davis issued thanksgiving declarations for their sides.

These were not like Washington's Thanksgiving proclamation or the type that Hale was promoting.

Rather these proclamations were different in nature and merely recognized military victories or sought divine support in the wake of military setbacks each respective side had experienced.

In fact, both Lincoln's and Davis's proclamations initially tended to call for days of fasting, "humiliation" and prayer.



Hale appeals to Lincoln to create a national Thanksgiving of a different character

On September 28, 1863 Hale wrote directly to Lincoln to ask that he officially recognize Thanksgiving as, “a National and fixed Union Festival (of America) for the last Thursday of November.”

Drafted by Secretary of State (and longtime Hale ally) William Seward, on Lincoln’s Thanksgiving Proclamation, issued October 3, 1863 became the standard for the unbroken series of Thanksgiving Day Proclamations that would follow.

Its message transcended the War and nation’s deep divide, and indirectly alluded to Pilgrim-inspired themes of celebrating God’s work in helping the American people survive and prosper in the face of great challenges.

These themes were amplified in his 1864 Proclamation:

He (God) has largely **augmented our free population by emancipation and by immigration**, while He has **opened to us new sources of wealth and has crowned the labor of our workingmen in every department of industry with abundant rewards**. Moreover, He has been pleased to animate and **inspire our minds and hearts with fortitude, courage, and resolution** sufficient for the great trial of civil war into which we have been brought **by our adherence as a nation to the cause of freedom and humanity**, and to afford to us reasonable hopes of an ultimate and **happy deliverance from all our dangers and afflictions...**

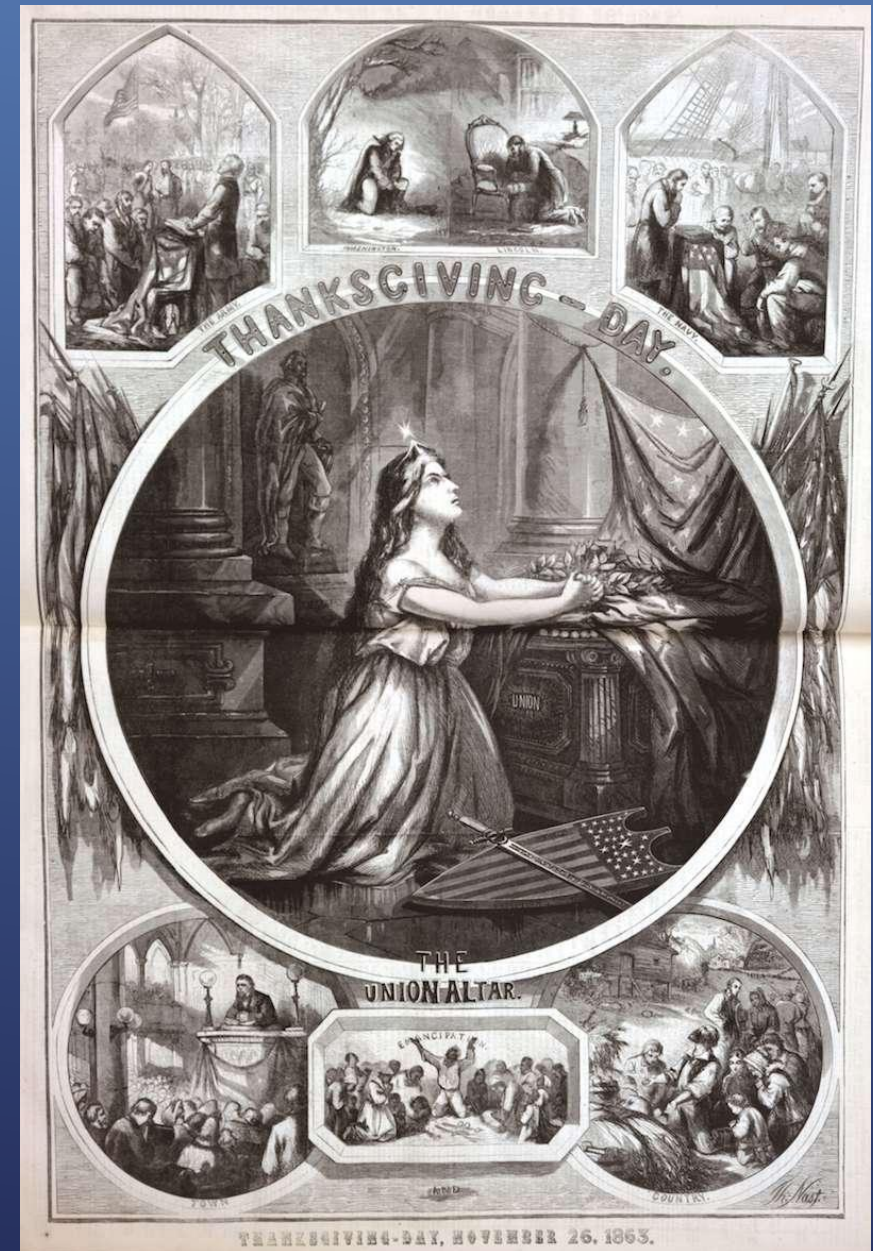
Other factors that may have motivated Lincoln

Strategic victories – at Gettysburg and Vicksburg in 1863.

The Emancipation Proclamation issuance and acceptance in the North. It provided the morally and strategically powerful issue of freeing enslaved people to the Union cause.

In practical terms this created the potential surge of Black manpower to Union forces, and a corresponding weakening of the Confederacy due to its dependency on enslaved labor.

And Lincoln undoubtedly recognized the propaganda value of a holiday that promoted feasting and celebration in a Union that was prospering economically – while at the same time the Confederate people suffered from a collapsing economy and rampant shortages – even in food.



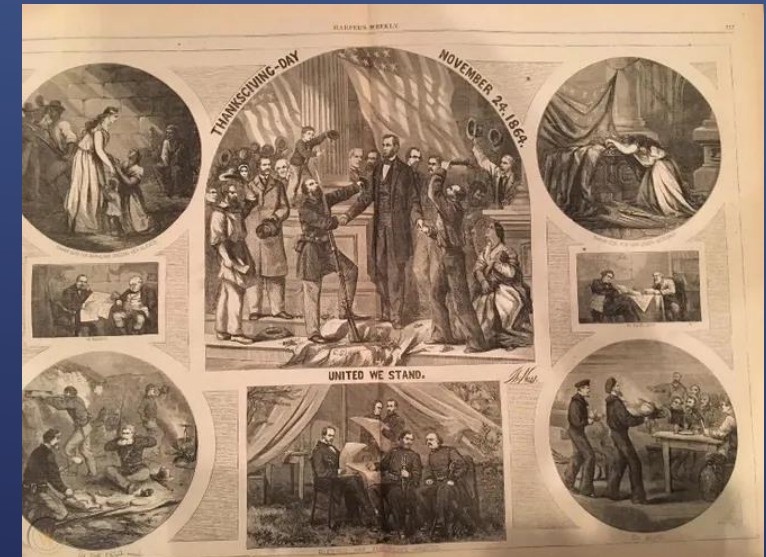
Lincoln's new, national Thanksgiving resonates throughout the Union and drives Americans to celebrate the holiday on a whole new dimension.

On the battlefield:

Thanks to patriotic civilian organizations like the Union League, New York in 1864 steamers provided over 400,000 pounds of Thanksgiving supplies including ham, canned peaches, apples and turkeys, for General Grant's troops at City Point. On the other side of the battle lines in Petersburg, VA, Confederate soldiers and civilians had barely anything to eat and scavenged to survive.

On the home front in the North:

The Washington Evening Star noted that the holiday, "was very generally observed." The paper also added that, "(People) set themselves to hearty observation of the day, not forgetting to pay due attention to that estimable feature of the occasion, the *Thanksgiving Dinner* which sent up its appetizing odors throughout the length and breath of the city."



Menu of the Thanksgiving dinner served to wounded Union soldiers at the Armory Square Hospital In Washington, D.C. – as reported in the Washington Evening Star:

Meats - Roast beef, roast veal, boiled ham

Poultry – Roast turkey, roast goose, chicken pie

Confectionary – Cranberry sauce, cranberry tart, apple pie, mixed cakes, jellies

Sundries – Smoked beef, bologna sausage, bread, butter. Celery, oyster stew, oysters raw, cheese, crackers, ice cream

Fish – Baked rock fish, boiled codfish

Vegetables- Sweet potatoes, Irish potatoes, kale slaw, pickled cucumbers, pickled beets

Fruits – Apples, almonds, raisins, figs

Coffee, tea, cocoa

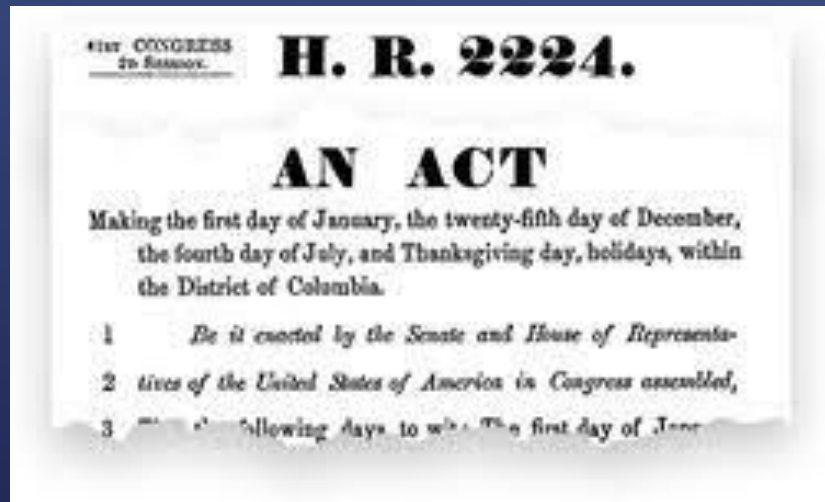


Lincoln's legacy of a national Thanksgiving holiday lives on, and grows beyond his death and as the Union is finally restored



Shortly after the nation is reunited, it formally enacts a law making Thanksgiving a federal holiday

On June 28, 1870, President, Ulysses S. Grant signed into law a bill declaring Thanksgiving, the 4th of July, New Years Day and another day as the first national holidays.



Challenge Question Three: What was the other holiday that became a federal holiday under this law?

Christmas!

Like Christmas, Thanksgiving has religious, and more specifically, Christian meaning to many people, but creation of these holidays as federal holidays is not meant to promote Christianity or any religion per se.

In fact, President Grant successfully blocked proposed legislation to that would have officially designated America as a Christian nation.

Thanksgiving, Christmas, the 4th of July, and New Years Day were supposed to be all-inclusive holidays for people from all backgrounds to enjoy in their own way.



In creating these first federal holidays Grant, was promoting Lincoln's legacy of uniting America around common national values of patriotism, freedom, tolerance, and unity

The effort was not only geared to re-unite the North and the South, but to assimilate the increasing number of immigrants

During the 1860s more than 5.5 million immigrants flooded into the country, and for the rest of the 19th Century many more would follow.



Forged by the Civil War, Thanksgiving becomes the modern holiday we know and love today – except for one thing – the date

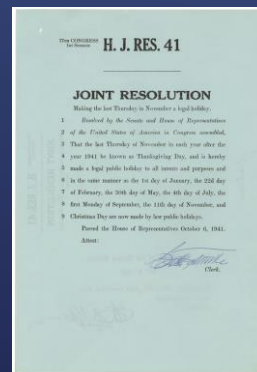
The observance of Thanksgiving grows throughout America in the decades that follow and it becomes associated with great parades, football games and family reunions.

However, unlike the other federal holidays established by the 1870 law, there is no day specified for its observance.

The assumption and practice for the rest of the 19th Century and well into the 20th Century was that it should be observed on the last Thursday in November.

And it was until in 1939, when President Roosevelt unexpectedly proclaimed that it would be observed on the second to last Thursday in November – in order to help the economy.

This caused a huge uproar and led many states not to comply. In order to end the controversy and confusion, Congress intervened, and in December 1941, a law was enacted designating the fourth Thursday in November as the official observance day for Thanksgiving day.



The legacy of Thanksgiving

Thanksgiving has constantly evolved since the founding of America and has grown to represent a special time of reverence, gratitude and joy for most Americans.

It is a time to celebrate individual families and friends through dinners, as well as community through parades, football, turkey trots and other public events.

In many ways it adheres to the Pilgrims' 1621 Thanksgiving in terms of its purpose, principles, and manifestations.

All of this is largely thanks to the work of Sarah Josepha Hale and Abraham Lincoln who both created a holiday in the midst of the Civil War - a holiday which invoked the past, but equally appreciated the blessings of the present, and the promise of tomorrow



Selected sources

Mayflower, Voyage, Community, War, Nathaniel Philbrick, Penguin Books

Thanksgiving, The Holiday at the Heart of the American Experience, Melanie Kirkpatrick, Encounter Books

Recognizing the Plymouth Thanksgiving: How the Pilgrims became America's forefathers
DISUNION: How the Civil War Created Thanksgiving, Kenneth C. Davis, New York Times, November 25, 2014

How the Slaves spent Thanksgiving Day May Surprise You, Jae Jones, The Tennessee Tribune, November 22, 2021

The roots of black Thanksgiving: Why mac and cheese and potato salad are so popular, Michael Twitty, Washington Post, November 17, 2016

How George Washington Angered Lawmakers over Thanksgiving, Dora Mekouar & Kelly Jean Kelly, Voice of America, November 23, 2022

How to Tell the Thanksgiving Story on Its 400th Anniversary, David Kindy, Smithsonian Magazine, November 23, 2021

Today in History: Thanksgiving during the Civil War, November 24, 1864, The Clemons Library Chronicle, William Clements Library, University of Michigan

Thanksgiving & the Civil War, Clara Barton Missing Soldiers Office Museum, November 27, 2014

Thanksgiving 2023, The History Channel, March 28, 2023

"Recognizing the Plymouth Thanksgiving: How the Pilgrims became America's forefathers," Royal Examiner November 20, 2022

Questions?



One view

Thanksgiving Day, a function which originated in New England two or three centuries ago when those people recognized that they really had something to be thankful for annually, not oftener if they had succeeded in exterminating... the Indians, during the previous twelve months instead of getting exterminated by... the Indians. Thanksgiving Day became a habit,... it was perceived that the exterminating had ceased to be mutual and was all on the white man's side, consequently on the Lord's side, consequently it was proper to thank the Lord for it and extend the usual annual compliments.

...the Indians have long ago been comprehensively and satisfactorily exterminated and the account closed with Heaven, with the thanks due. But, from old habit, Thanksgiving Day has remained with us, and every year the President of the United States and the Governors of all the several States... every November, ... advertise for something to be thankful for, and then they put those thanks into a few crisp and reverent phrases, in the form of a Proclamation, and this is read from all the pulpits in the land, the national conscience is wiped clean with one swipe, and sin is resumed at the old stand.

Mark Twain's remarks at the Philadelphia
New England Society in 1881

Another Perspective

(We) have abundant reason to rejoice. (We) are favored in all things that should make a Nation prosperous and a people happy. (We) have an indisputable right to an area of land sufficient for the needs of generations (of our people) to come. (We) have a perfect form of Government, wise laws, unsurpassed educational facilities for (our) children and money enough of (our) own invested to make these blessings permanent, It is true this Nation is neither numerous, wealthy nor powerful compared with many others, but it stands and relies upon the plighted faith of a Nation that has become the strongest on earth by reason of its respect for human rights.

D.W. Bushyhead, Principal Chief of the Cherokee Nation,
November 6, 1884 Thanksgiving Proclamation