

This Day in History... November 26, 1789 & 1863

Washington & Lincoln's Thanksgiving Celebrations

On November 26, 1789, Americans celebrated Thanksgiving for the first time under a presidential proclamation. Although people in the colonies had held harvest celebrations of thanks since the 1600s, the idea of a single, nationwide holiday did not yet exist. For more than two centuries, different communities held their own thanksgiving observances at various times of the year, often tied to local harvests, military victories, or special religious moments. It would take national leadership—and eventually the influence of several presidents—to turn Thanksgiving into the unified holiday we know today.



Stamp from the Holiday Celebrations Series

The story begins in the fall of 1789, during the first months of the new federal government. On September 25, Congressman Elias Boudinot presented a resolution to the House of Representatives encouraging President George Washington to declare a national day of thanksgiving and prayer. The proposal asked the president to invite the American people to give thanks for “the many signal favors of Almighty God,” especially for the country’s success in the Revolution and the creation of a new Constitution.



From the Series of 1902-03

Congress approved the request and chose a committee to meet with Washington. After reviewing the suggestion, Washington agreed. On October 3, 1789, he issued a formal proclamation recommending that citizens across the United States observe November 26 as a day of gratitude. He encouraged Americans to come together to give thanks for peace, liberty, and the opportunity to establish a stable government. Washington then sent copies of the proclamation to the governors of each state and asked them to make it public so that people everywhere could prepare.

Newspapers quickly printed the proclamation, spreading the news throughout the country. Communities responded by organizing church services, family gatherings, and public celebrations. In New York City, President Washington attended services at St. Paul’s Chapel, one of the few buildings to survive the great fire of 1776. He also donated beer and food to people held in debtors’ prisons, reminding Americans that a day of gratitude could also be a day of charity.

Though Washington’s proclamation set an important precedent, it did not immediately establish Thanksgiving as an annual holiday. Presidents John Adams and James Madison issued similar proclamations during their terms, but these observances were occasional rather than consistent. No law or custom required the president to issue such a proclamation every year. And not all leaders supported the idea. Thomas Jefferson, for example, believed that presidential thanksgiving

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proclamations violated the principle of separating church and state, and he chose not to issue one at all.

In the decades following the founding era, individual states began to establish their own annual Thanksgiving holidays. New York took the lead in 1817, and several northern states soon followed. Still, the dates varied widely—one state might celebrate the holiday in October, while another waited until December. Without a national proclamation, the holiday remained scattered.

The effort to nationalize Thanksgiving took a major leap forward thanks to Sarah Josepha Hale, the influential editor best known for writing “Mary Had a Little Lamb.” Beginning in 1827, Hale launched a determined campaign to make Thanksgiving a nationwide holiday. She wrote editorials, published letters, and contacted politicians year after year. Despite her persistence, she received little response—until the Civil War.



Hale was nicknamed the “Mother of Thanksgiving” and popularized the menu staples of turkey and stuffing through her writings.



Also from the Series of 1902-03.

In September 1863, Hale wrote to President Abraham Lincoln, urging him to create a permanent national Thanksgiving to help unify the country. Lincoln, already searching for ways to lift morale during the war, agreed with her proposal. On October 3, 1863, exactly 74 years after Washington’s original proclamation, Lincoln issued his own. He called for the nation to observe the last Thursday of November as a day of thanksgiving and prayer. Lincoln emphasized remembering the fallen, comforting families who had suffered loss, and working to “heal the wounds of the nation.” The first Thanksgiving under Lincoln’s proclamation fell on November 26, 1863.



The first Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade was held in 1924.

From that point forward, Thanksgiving was celebrated annually on the last Thursday of November—until 1939, when President Franklin D. Roosevelt tried to move the holiday up one week to boost retail sales during the Great Depression. The decision angered many Americans, who mockingly called the new date “Franksgiving.” Facing strong opposition, Roosevelt reversed course. In 1941, he signed a bill officially establishing Thanksgiving as the fourth Thursday of November, where it remains today.

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