

Meet the Woman Who Helped Make Thanksgiving a US Holiday

For much of the 19th century, Thanksgiving was only celebrated by New Englanders and Northeastern transplants in the upper Midwest and New York.

Without the dogged activism of Sarah Josepha Hale—a novelist, poet, and the editor of “[Godey’s Lady’s Book](#),” a lifestyle magazine with an impressive pre-Civil War circulation of 150,000—Thanksgiving may never have become the national holiday it is today.

Sometimes referred to as the “Godmother of Thanksgiving,” Hale—whose other enduring cultural contribution is the popular nursery rhyme “Mary Had a Little Lamb”—wrote thousands of letters and editorials promoting a national day of Thanksgiving before President Abraham Lincoln adopted the idea in 1863.

Between George Washington’s 1789 Thanksgiving proclamation and Lincoln’s, no president had issued such a proclamation (nor had Congress, which did not recognize the holiday until 1941), though many states and localities designated their own days of Thanksgiving.

Hale saw Thanksgiving as an important supplement to the nation’s principal civic holiday: Independence Day. While Independence Day celebrates the birth of our nation, our Founding Fathers, and our founding principles, Thanksgiving celebrates the origins of the American people, family, and faith in God.

As Hale [wrote](#) in 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.”

Nondenominational faith in a providential God was a prominent component of Lincoln’s Thanksgiving proclamation—as it had been in Washington’s first proclamation—and it has remained so in nearly every presidential proclamation since.

While Independence Day celebrates our freedom, Thanksgiving celebrates the faith that prevents that liberty from degenerating into licentiousness. While Independence Day celebrates our nation’s sovereignty, Thanksgiving reminds us that God should be the source of our highest devotion.

Hale envisioned that a nationwide celebration of Thanksgiving would also help bind the nation together more tightly. Living under the same Constitution and the same federal government was, in her estimation, not enough to forge one people from America’s diverse inhabitants and distinct regions.

As Hale [wrote](#):

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.

Thanksgiving, Hale believed, would strengthen the “fine filaments of affection” by spinning a shared American origin myth from a distinctly regional history.

Plymouth Rock would become the cradle of the American people, not just New Englanders. The Pilgrims would be scrubbed clean

of their idiosyncrasies and regionalisms and become embodiments of shared American values: courage, fortitude, faith, good will, and charity.

The Pilgrims were better raw material for this sort of mythologizing than other early colonists. The settlers of the Jamestown colony were the Pilgrims' equals in courage and perseverance, but their purposes were more mercenary than messianic. They sought cheap land and fortune.

As the descendants of Jamestown settlers pushed up the Charles River, they did not build townships brimming with civic virtue as the Pilgrims did. Instead, they built plantations worked first by indentured servants and, later, by African slaves.

Also unlike the Jamestown settlers, who were overwhelmingly single men, the Pilgrims came across the sea with families in tow, making the Plymouth colony not just a portrait of civic association and American grit, but also a fine representation of domestic life.

For Hale, recognition and reinforcement of the family was central to the Thanksgiving holiday. She [wrote](#): "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."

Thanksgiving is a celebration of domestic ties. Rarely do extended families come together to revel in Independence Day's fireworks and cookouts, parades and pool parties. Adults generally stay in the towns and cities they have moved to. If they travel, it is to the shore—not over the river and through the woods.

This seems natural. Family life has little to do with the historic events or the principles of government we commemorate on the Fourth of July.

For Hale, and evidently for Lincoln also, the Civil War emphasized the need to strengthen the strained filaments of affection, buttress divided and decimated families, and remember God's painfully obscured providence.

But the dimensions of civil society that Thanksgiving buttresses—shared cultural attachment, faith, and the family—are critical to a republican people in both peaceful and tumultuous times.

Our nation, to a greater extent than most, relies on a flourishing civil society. Our constitutionally limited government permits society to develop along its own trajectory, for good or for ill, making family and religious institutions critical sources of moral training.

Americans do not share a common ancestry or ethnicity, so building a shared historical narrative is all the more important to the sense that we are one people.

For these reasons, Lincoln was wise to make Thanksgiving an official holiday.

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