

Freedom's Feast **THANKSGIVING**

resources to get the most out of your **THANKSGIVING** celebration.

Pilgrims, Politics, Parades, & Pigskins: A Simple Thanksgiving History



What usually comes to mind when you think of Thanksgiving? Food, football, and shopping. For many, it's our favorite American holiday. More Americans travel on the Sunday of Thanksgiving weekend than on any other day of the year because we make a special effort to be with family and friends on Thanksgiving Day. Gathering together for the Thanksgiving meal is meaningful for us as individuals and as a nation.

Our Thanksgiving celebration is composed of a number of traditions added over the centuries, but it actually began thousands of years ago with the ancient practice of most agricultural communities. Grateful for the harvest they depended upon for survival until the next growing season, communities gathered to give thanks for their blessings.

Many of us know that the Pilgrims who first landed in Massachusetts in 1620 would never have survived without the help of the Native Americans who taught them how to plant crops for their first harvest. [Together they celebrated and feasted](#) over several days in the fall of 1621.¹

What many of us don't know is that **150 years later President Washington** declared another kind of Thanksgiving on the fourth Thursday in November. He wanted our new nation to mark the ratification of our Constitution and the convening of the first Federal Congress.

Think about it! We had now tied two special moments in our national story—our initial physical survival and the launching of our unique political system—to the ancient harvest celebration. We had given the Thanksgiving ritual our own special meaning.

By the mid 1800's, many Americans were observing a fall Thanksgiving holiday on their own which makes sense in the days before refrigeration. We knew where our food came from: we either grew it or purchased it on a daily basis. To make Thanksgiving a national holiday, however, it required a champion.

In 1838, [Sarah Josepha Hale](#), the editor of *Godey's Lady's Book*, the most widely circulated woman's magazine in America, launched a 38-year-long campaign to have every American celebrate Thanksgiving on the same day. She wrote [40 Thanksgiving theme-based editorials](#) and sent hundreds of letters to governors, senators, and presidents. She even promoted the traditional menu we eat today.

By 1848, Sarah reported that **24 of 29 state governors had proclaimed the last Thursday of November** as a state Thanksgiving Day. And finally, in the midst of the Civil War, a key letter from Sarah helped to convince **President Lincoln on October 3, 1863** to declare the last Thursday of November national Thanksgiving Day "to heal the wounds of the nation."

But Sarah wasn't satisfied. She saw Thanksgiving as an essential bonding holiday for families and for the nation. She didn't want us to depend on annual presidential proclamations for its celebration. She first proposed a Congressional resolution to make Thanksgiving a legal holiday



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in 1871. **But her dream wasn't realized until 1941** when Congress responded to President Roosevelt's 1939 Thanksgiving proclamation. Under pressure from the National Retail Dry Goods Association, Roosevelt moved the holiday that year from the last Thursday to the fourth Thursday to extend the Christmas shopping season as the nation struggled to recover from the Great Depression. Many were upset by the change and Congress was forced to act. In the end, the economy trumped tradition. Our new tradition became the fourth Thursday in November but Thanksgiving finally became a legal holiday.



When did the Christmas shopping season and Thanksgiving get linked? Gimbel's Department Store of Philadelphia was the first major store to sponsor a Thanksgiving Day parade in 1920, but Macy's of New York turned the connection into a national institution. [The first Macy's Parade on Thanksgiving Day](#) launched the Christmas shopping season in 1924 and coincided with advances in modern advertising. The parade started at 145th Street and ended at the Herald Square store where viewers would see the Christmas window display for the first time. [Called "The Macy's Christmas Parade,"](#) run by Macy's employees and inspired by old world festivals many remembered as first generation immigrants, the parade featured Central Park Zoo animals and celebrated America. Giant hot air balloons replaced the animals and debuted in 1927. Millions of New Yorkers have turned out as spectators over the years. Fifty million other Americans tune in on their TV's from 9 a.m. to noon each [Thanksgiving Day to watch](#). The Friday after Thanksgiving is now called "Black Friday" and serious holiday shoppers take advantage of heavily advertised sales as early as possible on that day. Another tradition now binds us from coast to coast. In many ways, our post Thanksgiving shopping activity could be seen as another kind of harvest.

Football was a uniquely American creation, a combination of soccer and rugby invented in the late 1800's. Played at first by colleges in the fall, it was a natural choice for an extended outdoor Thanksgiving activity while cooks prepared elaborate indoor feasts. **By the 1890's, college Thanksgiving Day football games drew crowds** as large as 40,000. The 1934 NBC live radiobroadcast of the sold out [Thanksgiving Day Detroit Lions game](#) on 94 stations around the country, was an instant success.

In 1956, the annual Lions Thanksgiving game was televised for the first time. By 1960, 87% of households owned at least one black-and-white TV and Americans began a new Thanksgiving tradition. We could either be at the game or we could watch it—along with the rest of the nation.

Sarah Josepha Hale *was* right. Thanksgiving does bring us together as families and as a nation. On Thanksgiving we are grateful for our many blessings. With our fellow citizens we celebrate our challenging beginnings and enjoy all the foods and funny behaviors that unite us. We love our turkey and pumpkin pie. We cherish the freedom that allows us to come home from wherever we are and celebrate having come through another year. We cheer for our favorite football teams knowing that we are joined by millions of others and appreciate our right to shop wherever we want. **We love that it is our Thanksgiving**—a holiday tradition that keeps evolving as we pass it down from one generation to the next.



¹ The First Thanksgiving: By Jean Leon Jerome Ferris.