

# Freedom's Feast THANKSGIVING

resources to get the most out of your THANKSGIVING celebration.

## PILGRIMS, POLITICS, PARADES, & PIGSKINS:

### *A Short Thanksgiving History*

What usually comes to mind when we think of Thanksgiving? Food, football, and shopping. For many, it's our favorite American celebration. More Americans travel over this holiday because we want to be with family and friends on Thanksgiving Day.

The way we celebrate Thanksgiving 2021 may be different for millions of Americans, but gathering together for the Thanksgiving meal remains deeply meaningful for us as individuals and as a nation.

Our Thanksgiving celebration is a collection of traditions added over the centuries, but its origin can be traced to an ancient universal practice.

Grateful for the harvest they totally depended upon for survival until the next growing season, agrarian 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 Wampanoag 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.

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 tied two distinct moments in our national story—one group's initial physical survival and the launching of our unique political system—to the ancient harvest celebration. **We gave the Thanksgiving harvest 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. Back then, 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, 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.** Over the years, 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. Sarah first proposed a Congressional resolution to make Thanksgiving a permanent federal holiday in 1871. It took 70 years to realize her dream.**



In 1939, under pressure from the National Retail Dry Goods Association, President **Roosevelt moved the holiday from the last Thursday in November to the fourth Thursday to extend the Christmas shopping season** as the nation struggled to recover from the Great Depression.



[Sarah Josepha Hale](#)

**Many were upset by the change and Congress was forced to act.** In the end, the economy trumped tradition. In 1941, Congress designated the fourth Thursday in November as Thanksgiving day, and **voted to make it a legal national 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,"** Macy's employees modeled it on old world festivals many remembered as first generation immigrants. The parade featured Central Park Zoo animals and celebrated America.

New giant hot air balloons replaced the zoo animals and debuted in 1927. **Millions of New Yorkers have turned out as spectators over the years while millions of other Americans tune in each Thanksgiving Day to watch.** **The Friday after Thanksgiving is now called "Black Friday."** Serious holiday shoppers take advantage of heavily advertised sales as early as possible, even on Thanksgiving evening. Recently, some retailers have pushed back wanting to preserve the holiday for their employees. Still, another tradition now binds us from coast to coast. Perhaps our post Thanksgiving shopping activity can be seen as another kind of harvest.



[Balloon ascent 1930s Macy's Parade](#)

**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 radio broadcast of the sold out Thanksgiving Day Detroit Lions game ran on 94 stations around the country . It 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 brings us together as families and as a nation. On Thanksgiving we are grateful for our many blessings. We remember 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 decide how to gather 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 we appreciate our right to shop wherever we want or **choose not to shop** at all. We love that it is *our* Thanksgiving—a holiday tradition that keeps evolving as we pass it down from one generation to the next.