

## **In the Spotlight: Thanksgiving a time to acknowledge family ties**

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America's first recorded Thanksgiving Day was in 1610, three years after the settlement of Jamestown. It was sporadically held until 1650, when it became a quasi-annual event. Nevertheless, Thanksgivings were celebrated in the 13 colonies on different days and months of the year for varied purposes: a good harvest, survival from natural disasters, the support or defeat of some Native American band.

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For the "Free and Independent States" of 1776, a Thanksgiving Day was established by the Continental Congress as "a day of prayer and fasting." But President George Washington infused the meaning of Thanksgiving with a "duty. . .to acknowledge the Providence of almighty God. . .and be grateful for His benefits."

Although Washington grounded Thanksgiving Day with a common and unifying theme, it was still practiced in the states at different times of the years for special occasions. It had not yet become the American ritual of today. And that occurred 200 years ago.

Abraham Lincoln in 1863 is credited for making Thanksgiving Day a national holiday on the fourth Thursday of November (shifted once by F.D. Roosevelt). But it was the year of 1862 when the conceptual seeds were planted that would blossom into the robust meaning that we celebrate today.

Two political elements were combined in 1862 that resulted in the meaning of our current Thanksgiving Day ritual. One was by Abraham Lincoln, who announced the Emancipation Proclamation that would take effect the following year. And that brought

the former slave and political activist Frederick Douglass to say that at last America has recognized “the whole human family.”

The second element was by a non-politician, a woman and also a citizen without the right to vote. Sarah Hale had become the editor of America’s most influential journal, “Godey’s Lady’s Book.” She, like Lincoln, decried slavery, arguing that it “not only dehumanizes the slave but also the slave master.” But how do we rise above those tendencies to dominate and feel superior to others?

Hale’s solution was to create a national Thanksgiving Day. It was to be a day reserved to give thanks to God, recognize our common humanity, celebrate the blessings of freedom, and recall the duties and responsibilities that go with it. And it was because of her forceful and persistent influence on Lincoln that he made it so.

Americans across the land now gather in the most fundamental unit of society, the family. We set aside our personal wants and political differences for the common good of the family and nation. For it is only by expressing gratitude for all that has been given to us from on high and from those around us that we can overcome passionate and blind self-interests.

And that applies to the nation within which we live. America is, after all, a family of families. It’s the source of our greatness. And it’s this annual acknowledgement by the nation that makes Thanksgiving Day an American ritual.

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