

Sarah's Thanksgiving Holiday

The first proclamation for a day of thanksgiving was issued by George Washington in 1789 calling upon all Americans to express their gratitude for the successful conclusion to the war of independence and the successful ratification of the U.S. Constitution. John Adams and James Madison designated days of thanks during their presidencies and days of thanksgiving were celebrated by individual colonies and states in varying ways, on varying days the next thirty-eight years, until a woman came along.

Sarah Josepha Hale (1788-1879) magazine mogul of her day who has been likened to "Anna Wintour of our day," was a poet, author, editor, literally the first female to edit a magazine. In the mid-nineteenth century, Hale was one of the most influential women in America and shaped most of the personal attitudes and thoughts held by women.

Not only a publicist for women's education, women's property rights and professions for women, Hale advocated for early childhood education, public health laws and other progressive community-minded causes. She was an expert of aesthetic judgment in fashion, literature, architecture, and civic policies.

Progressive causes such as creating a national holiday to celebrate thanksgiving between Native Americans and immigrant Pilgrims, came natural to Hale. She founded the Seaman's Aid Society in 1833 to assist the surviving families of Boston sailors who died at sea. And in 1851 founded the Ladies' Medical Missionary Society of Philadelphia, which fought for a woman's right to travel abroad as a medical missionary without the accompaniment of a man.

As a child, Sarah was a voracious reader of any books she could find and quickly observed few were authored by Americans, none by women and at a very early age, was motivated to change that. She was educated at home by her mother and her brother, Horatio, who each day when he returned from school, taught her what he had learned that day at Dartmouth. When he earned his degree, he awarded Sarah a degree in the Arts, summa cum laude.

Sarah married David Hale, a lawyer whose love of learning matched hers but, when pregnant with their fifth child, David died unexpectedly. With five children to raise, the oldest seven, the youngest born two weeks after his father's death, Sarah, young herself at age thirty-four, was challenged to support her family.

With few employment opportunities for women, she turned to writing. Her first novel published in 1827 made Hale one of the first novelists to write a book about slavery, as well as one of the first American women novelists. She was offered the editorship of a new magazine devoted to women called *Ladies' Magazine* and moved her family to Boston in 1828 to assume this position.

Then in 1841, she moved to Philadelphia to become editor of *Godey's Lady's Book*, a magazine she hoped would be instrumental in educating women. Over the next four decades, she turned it into the leading American women's literary and fashion periodical.

Her book, *Poems for Our Children*, contained her most famous poem "Mary Had a Little Lamb," and her most famous publication, *Woman's Record, Or Sketches of All Distinguished Women: From the Creation to A.D. 1854*, was one of the first biographical dictionaries devoted exclusively to American women writers. The promotion of women authors was her constant literary goal and she launched many women's careers.

In 1827 Hale initiated a campaign to establish thanksgiving as a national holiday, a campaign with which she would persist the next thirty-six years. She published numerous editorials and wrote letters to politicians, governors, senators and five presidents. Her letters to presidents Zachary Taylor, Millard Fillmore, Franklin Pierce, and James Buchanan were fruitless, but her letter to Abraham Lincoln garnered his support.

In 1863, Lincoln viewed Sarah's campaign suggestion as a national day to unify the North and the South and to help heal the wounds of the nation in the midst of a brutal and bloody Civil War being fought to preserve the union. Lincoln marked it for the final Thursday in November where it was celebrated every year until 1939 when President Franklin D. Roosevelt moved it up a week to increase the retail holiday spending period in an attempt to improve economic conditions of the Great Depression.

About that first thanksgiving in 1621: Was it between the Mayflower Pilgrims and the Wampanoag Native Americans in Plymouth Rock? Or was it in Provincetown? Or was it on board ship? Or was it between the Nauset Native Americans and English separatists?

True, the Pilgrims named their landing as 'New Plymouth' since they departed from Plymouth, England. But on November 11, 1620, they docked at Provincetown Harbor on Cape Cod. In fact, the first document alluding to government in the new colony, the *Mayflower Compact*, was signed by forty-one Pilgrims while still aboard the ship in Provincetown Harbor. A monument, construction begun under President Theodore Roosevelt and dedicated upon its completion by President William Taft, marks this historic docking in Provincetown.

But the Mayflower Pilgrims stayed there only about five arduous weeks. Historians report that continued clashes with the Nauset tribe of Native Americans pressured the Pilgrims to seek settlement elsewhere, thus they sailed to Plymouth on December 16, 1620.

Throughout their first brutal winter, most of the colonists remained on board ship, many suffering from exposure, scurvy and outbreaks of contagious disease. Only half of the Mayflower's original passengers and crew lived to see their first New England spring. Unknowledgeable of the brutal winter and permanent survival techniques needed in their new land, they had arrived poorly prepared, poorly equipped, and too late to plant for a fall harvest.

The Wampanoag Native Americans of Plymouth were a sophisticated society who had occupied the region for thousands of years. They had their own government, their own religious and philosophical beliefs, their own knowledge system, and their own culture. They were successful hunters, farmers and fishermen who understood the environment and how to survive the bitter winter weather. They were a people for whom giving thanks was a part of their daily life. But, they had been weakened by diseases and pillage of earlier European explorers and were now in fear of the stronger Narragansett tribe, more westerly located and not similarly ill affected.

The Wampanoag befriended the settlers who had weapons which they needed to survive, and in turn became essential to the survival needs of the colonists that first year. After harvesting their spring plantings in the fall, the Wampanoag and the Pilgrims had a celebration feast of thanksgiving in 1621.

It is that first thanksgiving between Americans and immigrants that is celebrated still.
Thanks, Sarah.



Sources:

- *http://nmai.si.edu/sites/1/files/pdf/education/thanksgiving_poster.pdf
- *http://nmai.si.edu/sites/1/files/pdf/education/NMAI_Harvest_Study_Guide.pdf
- *<https://www.capecod.com/lifestyle/provincetown-pilgrims-first-landing-spot/>
- *<http://www.history.com/topics/thanksgiving/history-of-thanksgiving>
- *<http://www.womenhistoryblog.com/2012/04/sarah-josepha-hale.html>