



About six weeks before President Lincoln traveled to Gettysburg, to dedicate a national cemetery at the place where so many men had died during the Civil-War battle, he made a significant decision.

It was the 3rd of October, 1863, when Lincoln pondered being thankful in the midst of a national tragedy which he, and others, called "The War of the Rebellion."

The President thought it would be good for Americans to have a national holiday on the last Thursday of November.

The focus of that national holiday, according to Lincoln's Proclamation, was to set-aside a special day to give thanks:

- To be grateful, despite the country being torn-apart by warring American states.
- To remember the bounty Americans enjoyed, despite the horrific loss of lives on battlefields.

The special holiday would come to be called "Thanksgiving Day."

It was that action which set in motion an observance still held on the last Thursday of November every year.

The words Abraham Lincoln used to declare a national holiday, in order to give thanks, were different—much different, really—from words an American President might use to accomplish the same purpose today. They were penned by Secretary of State William Seward, according to Lincoln's secretary John Nicolay. But the point of the President's goal, to focus Americans on a national day of gratitude, remains the same.

The country still has:

- Fruitful fields and healthful skies;
- An abundance of natural resources;
- A system of law, providing order throughout the land;
- Harmony among the people, despite political differences;
- Freedom to pursue the kind of lives we choose for ourselves.

Hereafter are the words which first-declared that the last Thursday of November would be an American national holiday.

By the President of the United States of America

A Proclamation.

The year that is drawing towards its close, has been filled with the blessings of fruitful fields and healthful skies. To these bounties, which are so constantly enjoyed that we are prone to forget the source from which they come, others have been added, which are of so extraordinary a nature, that they cannot fail to penetrate and soften even the heart which is habitually insensible to the ever watchful providence of Almighty God.

In the midst of a civil war of unequalled magnitude and severity, which has sometimes seemed to foreign States to invite and to provoke their aggression, peace has been preserved with all nations, order has been maintained, the laws have been respected and obeyed, and harmony has prevailed everywhere except in the theatre of military conflict; while that theatre has been greatly contracted by the advancing armies and navies of the Union.

Needful diversions of wealth and of strength from the fields of peaceful industry to the national defence, have not arrested the plough, the shuttle or the ship; the axe has enlarged the borders of our settlements, and the mines, as well of iron and coal as of the precious metals, have yielded even more abundantly than heretofore.

Population has steadily increased, notwithstanding the waste that has been made in the camp, the siege and the battle-field; and the country, rejoicing in the consciousness of augmented strength and vigor, is permitted to expect continuance of years with large increase of freedom. No human counsel hath devised nor hath any mortal hand worked out these great things.

They are the gracious gifts of the Most High God, who, while dealing with us in anger for our sins, hath nevertheless remembered mercy. It has seemed to me fit and proper that they should be solemnly, reverently and gratefully acknowledged as with one heart and one voice by the whole American People.

I do therefore invite my fellow citizens in every part of the United States, and also those who are at sea and those who are sojourning in foreign lands, to set apart and observe the last Thursday of November next, as a day of Thanksgiving and Praise to our beneficent Father who dwelleth in the Heavens. And I recommend to them that while offering up the ascriptions justly due to Him for such singular deliverances and blessings, they do also, with humble penitence for our national perverseness and disobedience, commend to His tender care all those who have become widows, orphans, mourners or sufferers in the lamentable civil strife in which we are unavoidably engaged, and fervently implore the interposition of the Almighty Hand to heal the wounds of the nation and to restore it as soon as may be consistent with the Divine purposes to the full enjoyment of peace, harmony, tranquillity and Union.

In testimony whereof, I have hereunto set my hand and caused the Seal of the United States to be affixed.

Done at the City of Washington, this Third day of October, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty-three, and of the Independence of the United States the Eighty-eighth.

By the President:

Abraham Lincoln

On the same day as the President issued his Proclamation, a Massachusetts newspaper published an editorial about deplorable conditions in prisoner camps, including Belle Isle near Richmond, Virginia:

As to our poor prisoners, Heaven help them, for there is no mercy in the rebel heart. ... You should see them, dropping down from wasting emaciation, starved to death! (Springfield Republican, 3 October 1863.)

Simultaneously, the President had another big job on his hands. His call for additional volunteer soldiers, earlier in the year, did not have the desired effect. He needed another 300,000 Northern men to help the Union defeat the Confederacy. Articles like this ran in various newspapers:

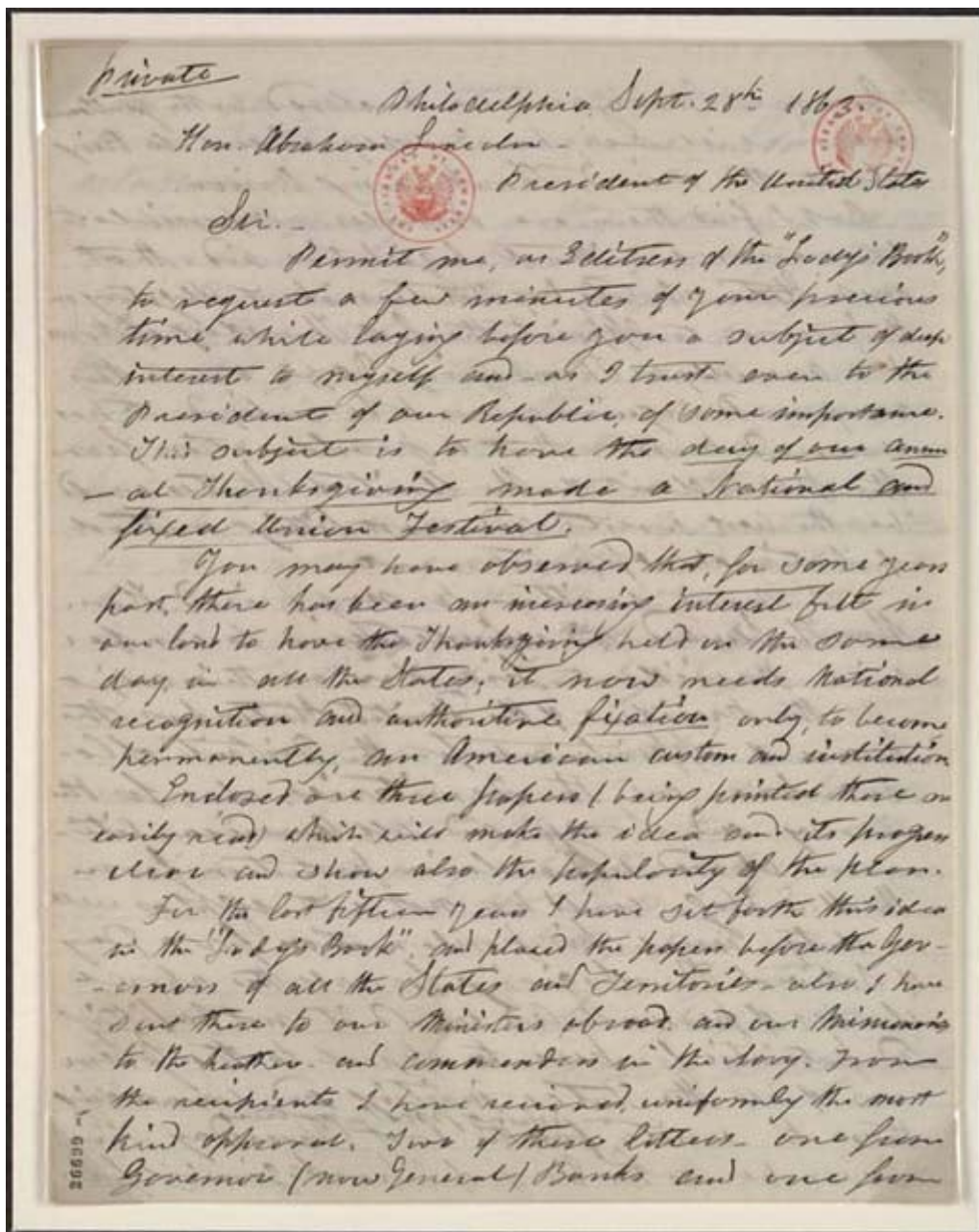
Call of the President for Volunteers

It will be seen that the President has made another appeal to the country for volunteers, calling for an additional force of three hundred thousand to be enlisted by the 5th of January [1864]; and whatever volunteers are not obtained by that time, the deficiency to be made up by drafting.

This call for volunteers, says that able Democratic journal, the Boston Post, "addresses itself to the patriotism and intelligence of the people." (Danville North Star, 24 October 1863.)

Despite all the turmoil—or maybe because of it—Lincoln issued his Presidential Proclamation for a national day of Thanksgiving.

The action reportedly took place when it did because of a letter (dated September 28, 1863) which Sarah Josepha Buell Hale (a 74-year-old magazine editor and author of the nursery rhyme "Mary Had a Little Lamb") sent to the President. She suggested that the "day of our annual Thanksgiving [be] made a National and fixed Union Festival."



So ... 74 years to the day after George Washington was the first American President to proclaim a day of thanksgiving, Lincoln established the specific day in November which Americans have observed, as such, ever since.

Credits:

Image of President Lincoln online via the Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum.

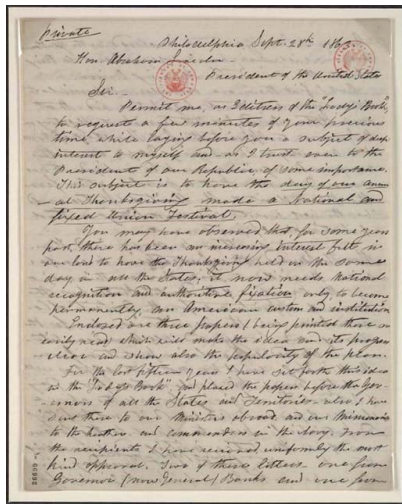
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Hale Letter to Lincoln

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