

PROJECT TITLE: Abraham Lincoln and Thanksgiving	
AUTHOR: Courtney Thompson	GRADE LEVEL & SUBJECT 3 rd Grade Social Studies

SCHOLARSHIP & RESEARCH

Primary Investigative Question(s) – How did Thanksgiving become a national holiday?

Contextual Essay –

Thanksgiving in the United States is possibly the premier family celebration, typically spent at home and marked with a substantial feast and football games. Traditionally, Thanksgiving began in 1621 with the first pilgrim harvest. The pilgrims, aided by their Wampanoag neighbors, had much to be thankful for with their first bountiful harvest. Throughout the next two centuries, George Washington, John Adams, and James Madison each issued ad hoc proclamations of a national day of Thanksgiving; however, the regional holiday remained largely popular in the New England states and lesser so in the mid-Atlantic states (Pleck, 775).

Beginning in 1825, a woman named Sarah Hale lobbied presidents, governors, missionaries, and navy commanders encouraging them to help make Thanksgiving a national holiday. Hale, editor of "Godey's Lady's Book" was a strong advocate of the American nation and union. She also wrote that "Thanksgiving, like the Fourth of July, should be considered a national festival, and observed by all our people" (Hale, 68). Her idea was not met with enthusiasm. Several presidents including Zachary Taylor, Franklin Pierce, and James Buchanan disagreed with Hale's idea that all Americans should observe a Thanksgiving holiday. During Lincoln's presidency, Hale was still a strong believer in the national holiday; Hale previously believed that a "unifying holiday would help avert the prospect of war between the states" (Pleck 775). However, the Civil War still ensued, and without a national Thanksgiving holiday.

This didn't stop the strong-willed woman, determined to unify her beloved country. Sarah Hale wrote to Lincoln, as she had many others, with the hopes of influencing him to proclaim Thanksgiving as a national holiday. Hale says in her letter that "for some years past, there has been an increasing interest felt in our land to have the Thanksgiving held on

the same day, in all states; it now needs National recognition to become permanently an American custom and institution." Hale also urged Lincoln to make an immediate proclamation so Thanksgiving would be celebrated by all Americans that year. Encouraged by Hale's entreaties Abraham Lincoln, in October of 1863, issued his Proclamation of Thanksgiving, calling for all Americans to celebrate a day of Thanksgiving. Lincoln asked for all Americans to "set apart and observe the last Thursday in November as a day of Thanksgiving and Praise to our beneficent Father." Lincoln encouraged Americans to pray that God will "heal the wounds of the nation and restore it," as America was in the midst of Civil War. He also listed many incredible blessings that God had given to America, despite his anger at the war. Lincoln described blessings such as fruitful fields, healthful skies, harmony with foreign nations, and an abundance of precious metals such as oil and coal. Lincoln wanted his fellow Americans to really see why he felt that it was important for everyone to celebrate Thanksgiving; he wanted Americans to know that God had given them such wonderful blessings in the midst of a devastating war, and that he deserved thanks from everyone on Thanksgiving. Lincoln also wrote in his Proclamation that Americans should "offer up the ascriptions justly due to Him for blessings and humble penitence for our national perverseness and disobedience" (Lincoln, 1863); in other words, Lincoln was referring to slavery and war as American sin and was asking Americans to pray for God's forgiveness. When the first Thanksgiving was celebrated, on the last Thursday of November in 1863, it was viewed a religious holiday, one in which families would begin the day by attending a church service, followed by a large meal in the afternoon. Men would hunt wild turkey for the feast, which consisted of two courses: the main meal and dessert (Pleck 775); and beginning in 1876, colleges, high schools, and sports clubs began playing football in the afternoon on Thanksgiving Day. Today, this remains largely the way Thanksgiving is celebrated in America.

In 2010, Barack Obama wrote in his Proclamation of Thanksgiving Day, "a beloved American tradition, Thanksgiving Day offers us the opportunity to focus our thoughts on the grace that has been extended to our people and our country...I encourage all people of the United States to come together whether in our homes, place of worship, community centers or any place of fellowship." While perhaps the focus has shifted from giving thanks to God to just being aware of the blessings in our lives, Thanksgiving remains an American tradition celebrated from coast to coast.

Sarah Hale helped to invent a domestic occasion which emphasized family homecoming and Lincoln saw in the holiday an opportunity for a nation to give thanks for its blessings. Today, as seen in Obama's Proclamation, Thanksgiving is a combination of both Hale's and Lincoln's ideas as well as the ideas of a changing nation. Although Thanksgiving remains a national holiday today, we cannot forget the brave woman-editor who set the whole idea of a national holiday into motion.

Annotated Bibliography—

Floyd-Thomas, Juan M. Thanksgiving Cultural Resources. 1-6. Retrieved February 9, 2011 from the JSTOR database.

Summary: This short article focuses on how both the Gettysburg Address and Lincoln's Proclamation set the perfect context for America's National Day of Thanksgiving. It also gives much information on the ways in which formerly enslaved African Americans helped to shape several of the culinary traditions of Thanksgiving.

Lincoln, Abraham (1907). Life and Works of Abraham Lincoln: State Papers. 162. New York: The Current Literature Publishing Company.

Summary: This book contains many state papers written by Lincoln during his presidency. Most notably for this instructional kit are his yearly proclamations of Thanksgiving.

Lincoln, Abraham (1863). Proclamation of Thanksgiving.

Summary: Lincoln's proclamation that made Thanksgiving a national holiday beginning in 1863. Lincoln wrote this proclamation in hopes of unifying a war torn country. He called for all Americans to give thanks and praise to God for their many blessings.

Neely, Mark E. (1982). The Abraham Lincoln Encyclopdeia. New York: Da Capo Press, Inc.

Summary: This encyclopedia features events, tragedies, and successes that occurred during Lincoln's life and presidency.

Obama, Barack (2010). Presidential Proclamation—Thanksgiving Day. The White House Office of the Press. Retrieved February 9, 2011 from

<http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2010/11/23/presidential-proclamation-thanksgiving-day>

Summary: This is current president, Barack Obama's, proclamation of Thanksgiving Day 2010. Obama asks all American's to gather in fellowship and give thanks for all we have received, to express appreciation, and to share our bounty.

Pleck, Elizabeth (1999). The Making of the Domestic Occasion: The History of Thanksgiving in the United States. Journal of Social History, Vol. 32, No. 4. 773-789.

Summary: This article discusses the origins of Thanksgiving and how it has changed, yet remained a "domestic occasion" from 1863 through the year it was written. It gives attention to how the Progressive Era, Industrialization, and Migration played a role in changing Thanksgiving.