

Thanksgiving Proclamation, 1863

Introduction

In 1621, settlers in Massachusetts celebrated what has come to be regarded as the first thanksgiving in the New World. On October 3, 1789, George Washington issued a proclamation creating the first Thanksgiving Day designated by the national government of the United States of America, to be celebrated on Thursday, November 26, 1789. John Adams and James Madison similarly declared Thanksgiving a holiday. However, it wasn't until October 3, 1863, at the height of the Civil War, that President Abraham Lincoln issued a Thanksgiving Day proclamation encouraging Americans "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 Prayer to our beneficent Father who dwelleth in the heavens." Thanksgiving has been celebrated in the United States ever since.

The copy of Lincoln's Proclamation featured here was printed in *Harper's Weekly* on October 17, 1863, to help spread the word about the day of observance. On December 5, *Harper's* published a two-page engraving by renowned artist Thomas Nast illustrating scenes of a grateful nation.

Excerpt

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 Prayer 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.

Questions for Discussion

Read the introduction and excerpt, and examine the entire text and the engraving. Then apply your knowledge of American history to answer the following questions:

1. What reason did President Lincoln provide to explain his decision to formalize the observance of a day of Thanksgiving?
2. Who and why did President Lincoln suggest should be remembered during the

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observance of Thanksgiving?

3. Provide specific evidence from the excerpt and the image from *Harper's Weekly* that links Thanksgiving to the Civil War. (Hint: There are many clues, especially in the image).

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Harper's Weekly, December 5, 1863, pp. 776-777. (Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC01733.05)