



Thankful soldiers - Thanksgiving declared national holiday during Civil War

BY ANGIE GEORGE

Provided images/Erie County Civil War Sesquicentennial Committee. Civil War soldiers at a Thanksgiving dinner.



President Abraham Lincoln's Thanksgiving proclamation of 1863.

The idea of setting aside a day to give thanks for a bountiful harvest is as old as ancient times.

The first day of thanks in the U.S. was celebrated by the Plymouth colony in 1621, but it would be another 242 years before Thanksgiving would become an official holiday.

Prior to the addition of Thanksgiving, the only national holidays celebrated in the U.S. were George Washington's birthday and Independence Day. In 1789, President George Washington declared Thanksgiving Day a national holiday in honor of the colonists' struggle for a new

constitution.

Despite Washington's proclamation, however, national acceptance of Thanksgiving was not fully embraced.

A disagreement between the colonies kept the declaration from coming to fruition. Many colonists did not feel the hardships of a small number of pilgrims warranted a national holiday. For the next 74 years, Thanksgiving was only sporadically celebrated in New England, with each state scheduling its own day of thanks, some as early as October and others as late as January.

A woman by the name of Sarah Josepha Hale deserves recognition for the establishment of Thanksgiving as a national holiday.

In 1827, she began a 36-year campaign to have Thanksgiving officially celebrated by the entire nation. Hale's wish: "Thanksgiving, like the Fourth of July, should be considered a national festival and observed by all our people."

To help accomplish her goal, she wrote thousands of letters to politicians, including five U.S. Presidents: Zachary Taylor, Millard Fillmore, Franklin Pierce, James Buchanan and Abraham Lincoln. Her argument was that "if every state would join in union in celebrating Thanksgiving, would it not be a renewed pledge of love and loyalty to the Constitution of the United States?"



Her persistence and persuading powers as editor of Godey's Ladies' Book, a popular women's magazine, finally paid off. In 1863, President Lincoln, looking for anything that might re-unite the country amid the Civil War, agreed with Hale and established Thanksgiving as a national holiday to be celebrated on the fourth Thursday of November.

Thanksgiving Day was to be a day celebrated by all Americans, regardless of religious or social background.

Having accomplished her goal, Hale shifted her efforts to promoting the inclusion of Thanksgiving into American culture by sharing recipes in Godey's Ladies' Book. According to Hale, a typical Thanksgiving meal for those on the home front consisted of seasonally driven foods such as roasted turkey, venison, mutton, roasted beef or ham, meat pie, cider, vegetables, cranberries, potatoes, oysters, bread and apple butter. All these items were intended to celebrate the bounty of the harvest.

While Thanksgiving Day dinner was well observed and foodstuffs plentiful on the home front, it varied for men enlisted in the Civil War. The first national Thanksgiving in 1863 was not officially observed by the military, and supplying Thanksgiving dinner to the troops was not a priority of the governments. To compensate, some organizations solicited for public donations to provide a proper Thanksgiving Day meal to soldiers and sailors.

The Union League Club of New York was successful in acquiring \$150,000 worth of food, including cooked poultry, sausages, cakes, gingerbread, cheese, minced pie and various other foodstuffs. The club managed to collect another \$57,000 in cash donations.

The 38th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry's Thanksgiving dinner "passed off in grand fashion," while the 143rd Pennsylvania Volunteer Infantry accepted several pounds of roasted turkeys and chickens, cakes, apple butter, vegetables and other contributions. The 9th Maine Regiment received four turkeys, six chickens and three ducks from the home front. Some men were not as lucky, as was the instance with supper eaten by the 124th Illinois Infantry, which consisted of the usual salt pork, hard bread and coffee.

Hale's yearnings for the public to gain a sense of unity led her on a relentless quest to establish Thanksgiving Day as a national holiday. "We have too few holidays," she wrote in her book Northwood. Abraham Lincoln took note and America now has a holiday that can be observed by all her people, much like the Fourth of July. It took about 250 years to weave the idea of Thanksgiving into the fabric of American culture. Thanksgiving has been declared annually by every president since Abraham Lincoln.

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(Minced Meat to be served as a Pie from "The American Frugal Housewife," Lydia Maria Child, 1832, page 41) (sounds a lot like a pot pie!)

Use up your leftover Thanksgiving Day turkey and try this traditional 19th century receipt (now called recipes) for minced meat pie:

Use 2 cups leftover meat; 1 cup cooked, chopped vegetables; 2 tablespoons butter; 2 cups apples, pared, cored, and sliced; 2-3 cups gravy; 1/2 teaspoon sage; pie crust made from 1/2 cup butter, 2 cups flour, and 6 tablespoons cold water.

Combine meat and vegetables. Melt butter in a large skillet and cook apples until soft. Add chopped meat, vegetables, gravy and sage to the apples and heat slowly. Use mixture as a pie filling and bake in a double crust in a moderate oven (350) for 45 minutes.