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Women Make History: Stories we should have learned in school

The past two issues have focused on the early (and mostly unknown) women who ran for President. While I had hoped to celebrate a woman in the White House in this issue, that event lies at some point in the future. Regardless of where you stand on the political spectrum, I encourage you to [read](#) the full text of Vice President Harris' concession speech. It's gracious, unifying, and encouraging. Nearly 200 years earlier, in an era when women couldn't vote, hold office, own property, divorce, or receive a higher education, the ground-breaking influencer, Sarah Josepha Hale, stirred the pot of cultural attitudes with her pen and sought to help heal a divided nation by bringing people together in a celebration of thanksgiving.

Meet The Mother of Thanksgiving: Sarah Josepha Hale

Thanksgiving brings to mind roast turkey, pumpkin pie, and other traditional dishes. But one of the creators of this national holiday believed that the simple act of breaking bread with family and friends was an opportunity to unite people divided by distance, moral issues, and politics.

Meet Sarah Josepha Hale, author, editor, influencer, and social reformer. She was also a tireless advocate for making Thanksgiving a national holiday.



Sarah Hale, painting by James Lambdin, 1831

Born in 1788 in Newport, NH, Hale's parents believed in educating girls as well as boys. At the time, no institutions of higher learning admitted women, so from a young age, Hale was home-schooled by her mother and later by her brother, a graduate of Dartmouth College. Initially, Hale worked as a teacher, but at the age of 25, she left teaching to marry. With her own five children, she continued her family's tradition of educating both her daughters and sons.

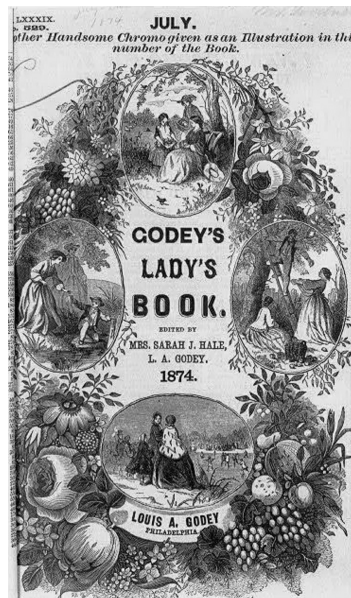


Sarah Hale, by Auguste Edouart, 1842
National Portrait Gallery

In 1822, Hale's husband died, leaving her in need of an income. An accomplished writer, within a year, she [published](#) her first collection of poems, [The Genius of Oblivion](#). Two years later, she wrote a novel, [Northwood](#), and in 1829, she published a second volume of poetry, [Poems for Our Children](#). This included "Mary Had a Little Lamb," still a popular nursery rhyme today.

Hale's writing received critical acclaim and when she was asked to help launch and edit a new publication, [American Ladies' Magazine](#), she accepted. Around 1836 she joined [Godey's Lady's Book](#), becoming editor-in-chief. She remained in that position for 40 years. Under her leadership, the periodical's circulation grew to more than 150,000 making it one of most influential magazines in the country.

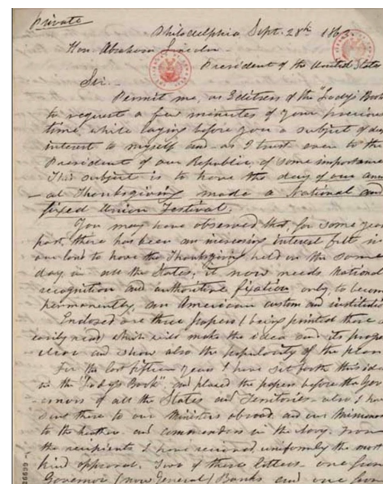
In 1861 the Civil War erupted, dividing families and pitting them on opposite sides of the battle field. Even before the first shots were fired, Hale had advocated for making Thanksgiving a national holiday. As a New Englander, she had grown up celebrating Thanksgiving, but it was a regional holiday and its traditions were many and varied depending on local custom.



Hale dedicated a chapter to Thanksgiving in her 1827 novel and she published editorials arguing for the holiday's creation. [Believing](#) that the simple act of bringing people together to share a meal could help ease tensions between divided factions, she urged readers to "put aside sectional feelings" and rally around the unifying cause of Thanksgiving.

In one editorial, Hale [wrote](#): "It is a festival which will never become obsolete...it cherishes the best affections of the heart—the social and domestic ties...calls together the dispersed members of the family circle, and brings plenty, joy and gladness to the dwellings of the poor and lowly...The moral effect of this simple festival is essentially good...a season of grateful joy."

Hale also lobbied state and federal officials. By 1854, her efforts were bearing fruit. More than 30 states and U.S. territories had instituted Thanksgiving celebrations.



1863 Letter to Abraham Lincoln

But it was at the height of the Civil War that President Abraham Lincoln finally granted Hale's wish. During the war, it was common practice by both President Lincoln and Confederate President Jefferson Davis to issue proclamations

of thanksgiving following military victories. When the Union Army captured the field at Gettysburg in 1863, Hale seized the moment. She wrote to President Lincoln and noted that he had the power to declare Thanksgiving a national holiday. She requested that he make it “permanently, an American custom and institution.” It is unknown whether Lincoln had already been contemplating such a move, but within one week of receiving Hale's letter, Lincoln made Hale's request a reality.

Wanting further assurance that the holiday would be enshrined in the American psyche, in 1871 Hale launched a campaign to have Congress pass legislation mandating that the last Thursday of November would be Thanksgiving Day. It took Congress more than seventy years to pass the bill, but the law was finally created in 1941.



In 1877, at the age of 89, Hale retired from her editorial role at Godey's. She died two years later.

Throughout her life, Hale remained a strong advocate for educating women and she helped to [establish](#) Vassar College. She also published emerging female writers such as Harriet Beecher Stowe, Lydia Maria Child, Lucretia Mott, Emma Willard, and Susan B. Anthony. A true daughter of the American Revolution, she used her influence to raise money to construct the [Bunker Hill Monument](#) and to save [Mount Vernon](#), the home of George Washington. Hale is buried in Philadelphia.

Ask a Friend: To some, the idea that a day spent celebrating our blessings can help bring people together may seem simplistic and antiquated, yet, have you ever healed a deep rift with a family member or friend? What did you have to overcome or give up to make it happen?

Ask Yourself: Have you disavowed family or friends over political differences? What would it take to heal those divides?

A Great Gift for the middle-schoolers in your life is a new work of fiction by award-winning journalist [Michele C. Hollow](#). [Jurassic Girl](#) is based on the true story of Mary Anning. In 1811, along the coast of Lyme Regis, England, the self-taught Anning discovered the bones of the first known [ichthyosaurus](#), a lizard/fish-like dinosaur. She was 12 years-old. Initially discredited by the London Geological Society, Anning went on to make several important discoveries and eventually became known as the “Mother of Paleontology.”

"Ho-Ho-Ho
The Holidays are Almost Here!
[Check out](#)
Women Make History
Puzzles, Mugs, Book Bags, & Aprons



[Sharon Spaulding](#) discovered the hidden story of Mary Ware Dennett, suffragist, sex education and reproductive rights activist, when she married one of Dennett's great-grandsons. Today, she curates the family's archives.

Sharon has spent twelve years researching first-wave feminism, the battle for reproductive rights, and Mary's life in the context of politics and social mores from 1914–1947. She received a grant from Radcliffe College's Schlesinger Library to support her research and the creation of a manuscript. Her essays about Dennett have appeared in [Ms. Magazine](#), [Smithsonian](#), and [New Hampshire Magazine](#).

Sharon is a popular speaker at women's and civic groups, and also book clubs. She is available to speak on the forgotten stories of remarkable women and the history of the suffrage and reproductive rights movements of the early 20th century. [Schedule](#) a talk with your group!

Sharon lives near Salt Lake City with her husband and black lab, Hank.

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