

# Congress Establishes Thanksgiving

SOURCE: archives.gov

On September 28, 1789, just before leaving for recess, the first Federal Congress passed a resolution asking that the President of the United States recommend to the nation a day of thanksgiving. A few days later, President George Washington issued a proclamation naming Thursday, November 26, 1789 as a "Day of Publick Thanksgivin" - the first time Thanksgiving was celebrated under the new Constitution. Subsequent presidents issued Thanksgiving Proclamations, but the dates and even months of the celebrations varied. It wasn't until President Abraham Lincoln's 1863 Proclamation that Thanksgiving was regularly commemorated each year on the last Thursday of November.

In 1939, however, the last Thursday in November fell on the last day of the month. Concerned that the shortened Christmas shopping season might dampen the economic recovery, President Franklin D. Roosevelt issued a Presidential Proclamation moving Thanksgiving to the second to last Thursday of November. As a result of the proclamation, 32 states issued similar proclamations while 16 states refused to accept the change and proclaimed Thanksgiving to be the last Thursday in November. For two years two days were celebrated as Thanksgiving - the President and part of the nation celebrated it on the second to last Thursday in November, while the rest of the country celebrated it the following week.

To end the confusion, Congress decided to set a fixed-date for the holiday. On October 6, 1941, the House passed a joint resolution declaring the last Thursday in November to be the legal Thanksgiving Day. The Senate, however, amended the resolution establishing the holiday as the fourth Thursday, which would take into account those years when November has five Thursdays. The House agreed to the amendment, and President Roosevelt signed the resolution on December 26, 1941, thus establishing the fourth Thursday in November as the Federal Thanksgiving Day holiday.

## Thanksgiving

SOURCE: history.com

During the [American Revolution](#), the [Continental Congress](#) designated one or more days of thanksgiving a year, and in 1789 [George Washington](#) issued the first Thanksgiving proclamation by the national government of the United States; in it, he called upon Americans to express their gratitude for the happy conclusion to the country's war of independence and the successful ratification of the U.S. [Constitution](#). His successors [John Adams](#) and [James Madison](#) also designated days of thanks during their presidencies.

In 1817, [New York](#) became the first of several states to officially adopt an annual Thanksgiving holiday; each celebrated it on a different day, however, and the American South remained largely unfamiliar with the tradition.

In 1827, the noted magazine editor and prolific writer [Sarah Josepha Hale](#)—author, among countless other things, of the nursery rhyme “Mary Had a Little Lamb”—launched a campaign to establish Thanksgiving as a national holiday. For 36 years, she published numerous editorials

and sent scores of letters to governors, senators, presidents and other politicians, earning her the nickname the “Mother of Thanksgiving.”

[Abraham Lincoln](#) finally heeded her request in 1863, at the height of the [Civil War](#), in a proclamation entreating all Americans to ask God to “commend to his tender care all those who have become widows, orphans, mourners or sufferers in the lamentable civil strife” and to “heal the wounds of the nation.” He scheduled Thanksgiving for the final Thursday in November, and it was celebrated on that day every year until 1939, when [Franklin D. Roosevelt](#) moved the holiday up a week in an attempt to spur retail sales during the [Great Depression](#). Roosevelt’s plan, known derisively as Franksgiving, was met with passionate opposition, and in 1941 the president reluctantly signed a bill making Thanksgiving the fourth Thursday in November.