

We have grown in numbers, wealth, and power as no other nation has ever grown, but we have forgotten God. We have forgotten the gracious hand which preserved us in peace, and multiplied us and enriched and strengthened us; and we have vainly imagined, in the deceitfulness of our hearts, that all these blessings were produced by some superior wisdom and virtue of our own. Intoxicated with unbroken success, we have become too self-sufficient to feel the necessity of redeeming and preserving grace, too proud to pray to the God that made us!

*Abraham Lincoln
National Thanksgiving Proclamation
October 3, 1863*

The mother of Thanksgiving

Sarah Hale badgered six presidents for national day of peace

BY DAVID MOORE
ASSOCIATED PRESS WRITER

NEWPORT, N.H. — Recently a Newport teenager was taunted for wearing a Sarah Josepha Hale T-shirt to school.

"Sarah Hale is Newport's most famous citizen," James Topham, 15, bragged to his classmates at Kearsarge Regional High School.

"Ya, well what's she ever done for me?" one asked.

"To start with, she's given you two days off each November," Topham replied.

Hale of Newport is considered the mother of Thanksgiving because of her nearly 40-year fight to have it declared a national holiday. But women's colleges, day care centers and public playgrounds also are legacies of the 19th century writer, poet and woman's rights advocate.

Generations of school children also know her for the poem "Mary's Lamb."

Residents of Newport, a western New Hampshire mill town of 6,000, preserve her memory with a plaque on the town common, a special room in the library and a literary medal given each year to a notable New England writer.

"Sarah was a very determined woman," said Andrea Thorpe, director of the Newport library. "She badgered six presidents about Thanksgiving."

Hale began urging a national observance in 1827. As editor of the Godey's Lady's Book, the most popular ladies magazine of its day, Hale devoted a special section to Thanksgiving and Thanksgiving menus each autumn.

Recipes for Indian Pudding with Furmenty Sauce, Ham Soaked in Cider, and Sweet Potatoes Baked in Maple Syrup ran along side editorials declaring a national holiday would be "a grand spectacle of moral power and human happiness,

“Sarah was a very determined woman. She badgered six presidents about Thanksgiving.”

— Andrea Thorpe
Newport library director

such as the world has never witnessed.”

Hale appealed to governors, congressmen and presidents to no avail.

She stepped up her efforts as the Civil War approached, and her appeals became more urgent and took on a patriotic note. In 1861, she begged the country to "lay aside our enmities and strifes ... on this one day."

Legend has it that shortly after the bloody fighting at Gettysburg, Hale managed a visit to the White House to plead with President Lincoln to have the nation devote a thanksgiving day for peace.

Lincoln issued his National Thanksgiving Proclamation on Oct. 3, 1863, several months after the Gettysburg battle and weeks before his Gettysburg Address.

But Lincoln chose Aug. 6, and Hale sent off a letter reminding him the first Thanksgiving was in the fall. Lincoln issued another proclamation specifying the holiday to be held on the last Thursday in November.

When Lincoln was assassinated, Hale wrote President Andrew Johnson to continue the holiday. He and every president after issued a similar annual proclamation until 1941, when

Congress made Thanksgiving a legal holiday.

"She worked as hard to improve opportunities for women as she did to get a Thanksgiving holiday," said Thorpe, who is caretaker of the Sarah Josepha Hale room at the library. "But she wasn't as militant as Susan B. Anthony or Carrie Nation and that's probably why she isn't as well known today."

Unlike Anthony and Nation — women who sought dissolution of gender stereotypes and demanded equal rights for women — Hale remained a moderate and preferred to work through carefully worded editorials and influential friends.

"Sarah Hale would not have fit into the 1960s, she was no radical," she said. "She worked the system to her advantage."

Hale helped organize Vassar College, the first college for women. She had a prominent male friend persuade the college's trustees to hire women teachers — a radical idea at the time, Thorpe said.

Born in 1788, Hale was the daughter of a Revolutionary War captain who became a Newport tavern keeper. Formal education for women in America was virtually unheard of at the time, and Hale was tutored by her brother, a student at nearby Dartmouth College.

She was widowed in 1822 with five children, and that's when she began writing books and poetry.

Hale was an early champion of elementary education for girls and of higher education for women, and was the first to advocate women as teachers in public schools, according to a biography by Ruth Filey published in 1931.

She started the first day nursery for working mothers, and was the first to suggest public playgrounds.



Associated Press

Sarah Josepha Hale was born in 1788 in Newport, N.H. The writer and poet, famous for 'Mary's Little Lamb,' waged a 40-year campaign to have Thanksgiving declared a national holiday.