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Grade Level: 5

Primary source citation:

“Congress Establishes Thanksgiving,” The Center for Legislative Archives of The National Archives, <http://www.archives.gov/legislative/features/thanksgiving>.

H. J. Res. 41, Making the Last Thursday in November a Legal Holiday, Oct. 6, 1941, RG 233, Records of the U. S. House of Representatives, Center for Legislative Archives.

Senate Amendments to H.J. Res. 41, Making the Fourth Thursday in November a Legal Holiday, December 9, 1941, RG 233, Records of the U.S. House of Representatives, Center for Legislative Archives.

“Thanksgiving 1939: The Year We Had Two Thanksgivings,” documents from online exhibit of the Museum at the Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library, <http://docs.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/THANKSG.HTML>.

Telegram from Leota and Helen Care, Alliance Restaurant, Alliance, Ohio

Letter from John Taylor; the Budget Press. Calendars. "Gifts" cards, Salem, Ohio; Dated August 15, 1939

Letter from Downtown Association of Los Angeles; Dated October 2, 1933

Allow students, in groups or individually, to examine the documents located at the above links while answering the questions below in order. The questions are designed to guide students into a deeper analysis of the source and sharpen associated cognitive skills.

Level 1: Description

1. Who were the authors?
2. Who were they writing to?
3. When were they written?
4. What medium or form was the document communicated? (Newspaper, government document, letter)

Level 2: Interpretation

1. How would you describe the author's tone of voice? (Formal, angry, excited, respectful, or

questioning?)

2. What purpose did the authors have in writing the letters?
3. What was the interval between the initial document and the final document?

Level 3: Analysis

1. What might have influenced the writers in their opinion of the possible change in the date of Thanksgiving?
2. Can you detect bias of any words or terms in the documents?
3. What ideas justify the decision the President and Congress made to change the date?

Congress Establishes Thanksgiving

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.

The Year We Had Two Thanksgivings

On Thanksgiving Day, November 23, 1939, Franklin Roosevelt carved the turkey at the annual Thanksgiving Dinner at Warm Springs, Georgia, and wished all Americans across the country a Happy Thanksgiving. Unfortunately, his greeting went unanswered in some states; many Americans were not observing Thanksgiving on the same day as the President. Instead, they were waiting to carve their turkeys on the following Thursday because November 30th in many states was the official Thanksgiving Day. Two Thanksgivings? Why were Americans celebrating a national holiday on two different days?

At the beginning of Franklin Roosevelt's presidency, Thanksgiving was not a fixed holiday; it was up to the President to issue a Thanksgiving Proclamation to announce what date the holiday would fall on. However, Thanksgiving was always the last Thursday in November because that was the day President Abraham Lincoln observed the holiday when he declared Thanksgiving a national holiday in 1863. Franklin Roosevelt continued that tradition, but he soon found that tradition was difficult to keep in extreme circumstances such as the Great Depression. His first Thanksgiving in office, 1933, fell on November 30th, the last day of the month, because November had five Thursdays that year. Since statistics showed that most people did not do their Christmas shopping until after Thanksgiving, business leaders feared they would lose money, especially during the Depression, because there were only 24 shopping days between Thanksgiving and Christmas. They asked Franklin Roosevelt to make Thanksgiving one week earlier. President Roosevelt ignored those concerns in 1933, but when Thanksgiving once again threatened to fall on the last day of November in 1939, FDR reconsidered the request and moved the date of Thanksgiving up one week. Thanksgiving 1939 would be held, President Roosevelt proclaimed, on November 23rd and not November 30th.

Changing the date of Thanksgiving seemed harmless enough, but in actuality proved quite controversial. It was so upsetting that thousands of letters poured into the White House once President Roosevelt announced the date change. Some retailers were pleased because they hoped the extra week of Christmas shopping would increase profits, but smaller businesses complained they would lose business to larger stores. Other companies that depended on Thanksgiving as the last Thursday of November lost money; calendar makers were the worst hit because they printed calendars years in advance and FDR made their calendars out of date for the next two years. Schools were also disrupted by Roosevelt's decision; most schools had already scheduled vacations and annual Thanksgiving Day football games by the time they learned of Thanksgiving's new date and had to decide whether or not to reschedule everything. Moreover, many Americans were angry that Roosevelt tried to alter such a long-standing tradition and American values just to help businesses make more money.*

As opposition grew, some states took matters into their own hands and defied the Presidential Proclamation. Some governors declared November 30th as Thanksgiving. And so, depending upon where one lived, Thanksgiving was celebrated on the 23rd and the 30th. This was worse than changing the date in the first place because families that lived in states such as New York did not have the same day off as family members in states such as Connecticut! Family and friends were unable to celebrate the holiday together.

Turkey graphic
Franklin Roosevelt observed Thanksgiving on the second to last Thursday of November for two more years, but the amount of public outrage prompted Congress to pass a law on December 26, 1941, ensuring that all Americans would celebrate a unified Thanksgiving on the fourth Thursday of November every year.

*Many Americans at the time believed that the Pilgrims chose the last Thursday in November to be Thanksgiving, but that is not the case. Although Americans had celebrated days of thanksgiving before, it was not until 1863 when President Lincoln began the observance of Thanksgiving in November.

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CONGRATULATIONS ON YOUR REELECTION. WHEN SHALL WE SERVE OUR
THANKSGIVING TURKEY 21ST? OR 28TH?=
Nov 21st

LEOTA AND HELEN CARE THE ALLIANCE RESTAURANT.

2 1ST 28TH.

THE COMPANY WILL APPRECIATE SUGGESTIONS FROM ITS PATRONS CONCERNING ITS SERVICE

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THE WHITE HOUSE August 15, 1939

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RECEIVED

The President,
Washington, D. C.

SUBJECT: Thanksgiving

Mr. President:

Millions of calendars for 1940 have already been printed and sold. We alone have printed over two million 1940 calendars. As you probably know, calendars are sold mostly in January, February, and March, for delivery in the Fall of the year, for use during the coming year, in order that we may keep our employees busy throughout the full twelve months. Otherwise, we would be working day and night the last few months and shut down most of the year.

This situation makes it necessary to print calendars almost a full year in advance. As stated before, at the present time nearly all calendars are printed for 1940 and we have in preparation most of the preliminary work for 1941 calendars, which are sold by salesmen starting the first of December. In other words, actual samples of 1941 calendars are placed on display in December 1939.

Your change for Thanksgiving naturally makes all 1939 calendars obsolete, as well as all 1940 calendars, although it is not too late to change the preliminary work for 1941.

Note

I am afraid your change for Thanksgiving is going to cause the calendar manufacturers untold grief. If very many customers demand 1940 calendars to correspond with your proclamation, hundreds of thousands of dollars will be lost by the calendar companies, and in many instances it will result in bankruptcy.

You will realize, I am sure, that if you had purchased calendars last January for delivery this coming December, to be distributed January 1940, you would want those calendars to show the correct date for Thanksgiving, and you would expect the manufacturer to furnish them -- Presidential Proclamations notwithstanding. Due to the fact that 90% of the calendars will be showing Thanksgiving on the usual date for 1940, your Presidential Proclamation should be rescinded; and if it is necessary to change Thanksgiving it should not be changed until 1941. Otherwise, it is going to be difficult for calendar manufacturers to get their customers to use the calendars already printed.

Yours respectfully,

John Taylor
John Taylor

JT:P

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DOWNTOWN ASSOCIATION

OF LOS ANGELES

426 A. G. BARTLETT BUILDING :: SEVENTH AND SPRING
 TELEPHONE VANDIKE 1428

October 2, 1933.

DAIN STURGES
 SECRETARY

COMMITTEES FOR 1933

*Call 10-4-33
 em*

Hon. Franklin D. Roosevelt,
 President of the United States,
 White House,
 Washington, D.C.

Dear Mr. President:

Thanksgiving, this year, according to the usual custom, would fall upon November 30th, the last Thursday in November, which would leave but twenty shopping days before Christmas.

It is an established fact that Christmas buying begins vigorously every year in the retail stores the day following Thanksgiving and that the Thanksgiving to Christmas period is the busiest retail period of the whole year.

The Downtown Association of Los Angeles feels that Abraham Lincoln's Proclamation of 1864 setting aside a day for Thanksgiving to be the 4th or last Thursday in November of each year can be carried out to the letter by designating in your Thanksgiving Proclamation this year, November 23rd, the fourth Thursday in November as the day of Thanksgiving.

You will appreciate the importance that an additional week incorporated in this great holiday season will have upon the distribution activities of the entire United States and the added impetus that will be given thereby to the efforts of the administration and the N.R.A. to increase employment and purchasing power.

The Downtown Association of Los Angeles respectfully requests your consideration of this practical suggestion, believing that your approval would have the deep appreciation of the merchants of the entire country.

Respectfully yours,

Dain Sturges
 Secretary.

DS:S