Teaching Thanksgiving with Primary Sources

Thanksgiving is a uniquely American holiday designed to offer Americans an opportunity to give thanks while reflecting on their country. These primary sources provide a lens for evaluating the popular and official attitude toward Thanksgiving from the nation’s founding down through the twentieth century. This set of images and documents allows students to investigate change over time, while also looking at a particular expression of the political, economic, and social concerns and ideas of each age. All sources from the Library of Congress.

Teaching Primary Source Materials

Here are some ideas for analyzing these primary sources in your classroom:

Step 1: Observations: What strikes you in reading this document or looking at this visual? What sorts of things leap out at you? What grabs your attention?
--These questions can be useful for opening discussion, breaking the classroom ice, finding out what’s on students’ minds and where their knowledge and understanding of a given subject begins.

Step 2: Context: Who created this document or image? When? Where was it published? How does this source relate to other sources from this time?
--These questions help students understand where to situate this source within history, and to determine the audience and the author/illustrator’s intent.

Step 3: Questions: What puzzles you? What don’t you get? What do we need to work together to try to figure out? What do you find here that you didn’t know, or challenges something that you thought you knew?
--These questions help history teachers keep alive the all-important surprise factor, that keeps both students and instructors open to new information and insights.

Step 4: Patterns: What patterns do you see? What concepts or key words keep cropping up? Where do you find repeated expressions of the same problems and concerns, hope and fears, methods and goals?
--This helps students exercise historical empathy by trying to understand the world through the eyes of historical subjects. These questions are especially useful for interpreting two or more documents together, side-by-side, by exploring what patterns emerge from a group of sources.

Step 5: Connections: What connections do you see? Does this source remind you of a source or issue from another historical time period? Do you see any similarities between this source and something from our modern time?
--These questions are intended to help students draw connections between historical eras and make thematic links across a course of study. Also it helps students potentially relate history to something else they see as important in their life or time.

Adapted from “A Basic Toolbox for Teaching Primary Source Materials” by Karen Halttunen and Jeff Pollard, The History Project at UC Davis
Title: Thanksgiving in Camp, sketched Thursday 28th 1861

Creator(s): Waud, Alfred R. (Alfred Rudolph), 1828-1891, artist

Date Created/Published: 1861 [November] 28.

Medium: 1 drawing on tan paper : pencil and Chinese white ; 24.7 x 35.1 cm. (sheet).

http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2004660226/
Date Created/Published: 1869.
Medium: 1 print : wood engraving.
Summary: Uncle Sam carving turkey at large table surrounded by men, women and children of different races; centerpiece is labeled "self-government/universal suffrage".

http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2002714704/
Title: Castle Garden--Their First Thanksgiving Dinner

Creator(s): Harper, W. St. John, 1851-1910, artist
Date Created/Published: 1884.
Medium: 1 print : wood engraving.
Summary: Man, woman, and boy (probably immigrants), eating on a picnic bench, New York City.

http://www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/cph.3b45443/#
Title: Thanksgiving Day Lesson at Whittier

Creator(s): Johnston, Frances Benjamin, 1864-1952, photographer
Date Created/Published: [1899 or 1900]
Medium: 1 photographic print.
Summary: African American children learning about Thanksgiving, with model log cabin on table, Whittier Primary School, Hampton, Virginia

http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/97507246/
Title: The Thanksgiving Turkey

Creator(s): Campbell, Alfred S.,
Date Created/Published: c1900.
Medium: 1 photographic print on cabinet card.
Summary: African American woman plucking turkey on porch.

http://www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/cph.3c00216/#
Title: Farmer Holding Sheaves with Two Yoked Oxen

Creator(s): Penfield, Edward, 1866-1925, artist
Date Created/Published: [between 1884 and 1925]
Medium: 1 drawing : watercolor.

http://www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/cai.2a14104/#

Medium: 1 print: chromolithograph.

Summary: Illustration shows Uncle Sam standing at a table with 7 seated, dour-looking figures showing the attributes of the rulers of "Japan" (Meiji, Emperor of Japan), "Italy" (Victor Emmanuel III), "France" (Emile Loubet), "England" (Edward VII), "Russia" (Nicholas II), "Germany" (William II), and "Austria" (Franz Joseph I); Uncle Sam is making a toast to "Competition" over a large turkey labeled "Commercial Supremacy".

http://lccn.loc.gov/2010651488
Title: The Gobbler's Dream

Creator(s): Pughe, J. S. (John S.), 1870-1909, artist
Date Created/Published: N.Y. : J. Ottmann Lith. Co., Puck Bldg., 1904 November 23.
Medium: 1 photomechanical print : offset, color.
Summary: Illustration shows a turkey sitting on a tree branch, dreaming of a "Vegetarian Pledge" and countless people lining up to sign their names, and all the wild and domestic animals laughing; in the lower right corner, the reality is an old man with an axe coming for the turkey.

http://www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/ppmsca.25906/#
Title: Puck Thanksgiving 1907

Creator(s): Glackens, L. M. (Louis M.), 1866-1933, artist


Medium: 1 photomechanical print : offset, color.

Summary: Illustration shows Theodore Roosevelt about to chop the head off a turkey labeled "Flim-Flam Finance" on the chopping block, the feathers are labeled "Worthless Collateral, Wild Cat Bank, Fake Bonds, Worthless Securities, [and] Fake Stocks"; a diminutive man labeled "Small Investor" is standing in front of the chopping block, holding an axe.

http://www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/ppmsca.26218/#
**Date Created/Published:** N.Y. : Published by Keppler & Schwarzmann, Puck Building, 1910 November 23.

**Medium:** 1 photomechanical print : offset, color.

**Summary:** Illustration shows a disheveled Uncle Sam sitting at a messy table in a restaurant after a wild party where too much alcohol has been consumed, there are overturned chairs, and a man labeled "Capital" lies on the floor beneath one end of the table, an overturned bottle labeled "Overspeculation" spills contents labeled "Overissue of Securities", another bottle is labeled "Overbuilding", bottles on the floor are labeled "Waste" and "Overproduction", and a spill is labeled "Overestimation of Natural Resources"; wax from a candle on the table is labeled "Overconfidence" and a bottle next to Uncle Sam is labeled "Overcapitalization", lying on the floor at the other end of the table, among overturned chairs, is a man labeled "Labor", on the table above him is a spill labeled "Overspending" and a box of cigars labeled "Overbuying" is spilling its contents on the floor. In a broken mirror on the back wall are the words "National Vanity" and printed on a window is "Rationalism".

[http://lccn.loc.gov/2011647642](http://lccn.loc.gov/2011647642)
Date Created/Published: c1912.

Medium: 1 print : lithograph.

Summary: Caricature showing pilgrims eating hot dogs and Indians drinking "pink firewater". Sign on wall of fort reads, "foot ball ye Indians versus ye Pilgrims 2 p.m."

http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2002720353/
Title: Thanksgiving: a Study in Proportion

Creator(s): Keppler, Udo J., 1872-1956, artist

Date Created/Published: N.Y.: Published by Keppler & Schwarzmann, Puck Building, 1912 November 20.

Medium: 1 photomechanical print : offset, color.

Summary: Illustration shows a pile of oversized items that are used to fill leisure time, such as golf clubs, a shotgun, a football, a riding crop, a theater mask, and a horn, also a large turkey, celery, cranberries, and a pumpkin; on the right, in the shadow of these material goods, is a diminutive church, dark and possibly empty.

http://www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/ppmsca.27895/#
Title: Thanksgiving, 1942. Freedom to worship God in his own way--everywhere in the world.

For this we fight, said President Roosevelt in his address to the seventy-seventh Congress. Because the Fincham family, like other Americans, have been nourished on the Bill of Rights and the Constitution, they are fighting for the things they pray for. Four of Mr. and Mrs. Wayman Fincham's six fighting sons, visiting their home in Silver Spring, Maryland, attend church services.
City of New York, October 3, 1789.

Whereas it is the duty of all Nations to acknowledge the providence of Almighty God, to obey his will, to be grateful for his benefits, and humbly to implore his protection and favor, and Whereas both Houses of Congress have by their joint Committee requested me "to recommend to the People of the United States a day of public thanks-giving and prayer to be observed by acknowledging with grateful hearts the many signal favors of Almighty God, especially by affording them an opportunity peaceably to establish a form of government for their safety and happiness."

Now therefore I do recommend and assign Thursday the 26th day of November next to be devoted by the People of these States to the service of that great and glorious Being, who is the beneficent Author of all the good that was, that is, or that will be. That we may then all unite in rendering unto him our sincere and humble thanks, for his kind care and protection of the People of this country previous to their becoming a Nation, for the signal and manifold mercies, and the favorable interpositions of his providence, which we experienced in the course and conclusion of the late war, for the great degree of tranquillity, union, and plenty, which we have since enjoyed, for the peaceable and rational manner in which we have been enabled to establish constitutions of government for our safety and happiness, and particularly the national One now lately instituted, for the civil and religious liberty with which we are blessed, and the means we have of acquiring and diffusing useful knowledge and in general for all the great and various favors which he hath been pleased to confer upon us.

And also that we may then unite in most humbly offering our prayers and supplications to the great Lord and Ruler of Nations and beseech him to pardon our national and other transgressions, to enable us all, whether in public or private stations, to perform our several and relative duties properly and punctually, to render our national government a blessing to all the People, by constantly being a government of wise, just and constitutional laws, discreetly and faithfully executed and obeyed, to protect and guide all Sovereigns and Nations (especially such as have shown kindness unto us) and to bless them with good government, peace, and concord. To promote the knowledge and practice of true religion and virtue, and the encrease of science among them and Us, and generally to grant unto all Mankind such a degree of temporal prosperity as he alone knows to be best.

[Note 77: A copy of this proclamation was sent to the executives of the States by the President in a brief form letter (October 3). This form is recorded in the "Letter Book" in the Washington Papers.]

[Note 78: The Senate concurred in the House resolve to this effect, September 26.]

[Note 79: From the original in the writing of William Jackson. It was signed by Washington, who had written in the day "third" in the date. This was the first national Thanksgiving Day proclamation under the Constitution.]

http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/mgw:@field(DOCID+@lit(gw300388))
Sarah J. Hale to Abraham Lincoln, Monday, September 28, 1863 (Thanksgiving)

Sir--

Permit me, as Editor of the "Lady's Book", to request a few minutes of your precious time, while laying before you a subject of deep interest to myself and -- as I trust -- even to the President of our Republic, of some importance. This subject is to have the day of our annual Thanksgiving made a National and fixed Union Festival.

You may have observed that, for some years past, there has been an increasing interest felt in our land to have the Thanksgiving held on the same day, in all the States; it now needs National recognition and authoritative fixation, only, to become permanently, an American custom and institution...

For the last fifteen years I have set forth this idea in the "Lady's Book", and placed the papers before the Governors of all the States and Territories -- also I have sent these to our Ministers abroad, and our Missionaries to the heathen -- and commanders in the Navy. From the recipients I have received, uniformly the most kind approval...

Now the purpose of this letter is to entreat President Lincoln to put forth his Proclamation, appointing the last Thursday in November (which falls this year on the 26th) as the National Thanksgiving for all those classes of people who are under the National Government particularly, and commending this Union Thanksgiving to each State Executive: thus, by the noble example and action of the President of the United States, the permanency and unity of our Great American Festival of Thanksgiving would be forever secured...

Excuse the liberty I have taken

With profound respect

Yrs truly

Sarah Josepha Hale

Editress of the "Lady's Book"

[Note 1 ID: Sarah J. Hale, a poet and novelist, became editor of the *Ladies' Magazine* in 1828. In 1837 the *Ladies' Magazine* was sold and became known as the *Lady's Book*. Hale served as editor of the *Lady's Book* until 1877. During her tenure as editor, Hale made the magazine the most recognized and influential periodical for women. Hale was involved in numerous philanthropic pursuits and used her position as editor to advocate the education of women.]

[Note 2 Nathaniel P. Banks and Edwin D. Morgan]

[Note 3 On October 3, Lincoln issued a proclamation that urged Americans to observe the last Thursday in November as a day of thanksgiving. See *Collected Works*, VI, 496-97.]


http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/mal:@field(DOCID+@lit(d2669900))
Excerpt:

...It is the peculiar happiness of Thanksgiving Day that nothing political mingles in its observance. It is in its very nature a religious and domestic holiday. It belongs to the altar and the heart, at which women should ever be present; and the women of our country should take this day under their peculiar charge, and sanctify it to acts of piety, charity, and domestic love.

…Although Providence has blessed our land with an abounding harvest, we must remember that there are among us many who will have but a scanty and insufficient share in this abundance. The civil war has given to our care many maimed and helpless men, many widows and orphans, many destitute refugees. Notwithstanding all the provision made by Government, there will be ample room for all that private benevolence can bestow. Let us each see to it that on this one day there shall be no family or individual, within the compass of our means to help, who shall not have some portion prepared, and some reason to join in the general Thanksgiving.

http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mal&fileName=mal1/388/3888900/malpage.db&recNum=1
New York Citizens to Abraham Lincoln, Saturday, April 08, 1865 (Petition requesting day of thanksgiving)

The citizens of New York,

To Abraham Lincoln, President of the United States,

With devout thankfulness to Almighty God for the sacred protection He has extended to us as a Nation during the perils and conflicts of Civil War, we desire to acknowledge His perpetual goodness and to join in prayer for His Holy Name.

In the confident belief that the measures which have guided your Council in the execution of His great trust committed to your hands, do respectfully request that a day be designated in your own good time, may be set apart, when the whole people may be invited to assemble and meet together to offer praises and thanksgiving for the brilliant successes which, under Divine Providence, have been accorded to us by the persistent energy, sagacity, and fidelity of the Government, and by the skill, intrepidity, and self-sacrificing devotion of the Army and Navy engaged, in maintaining the honor and preserving the life of the Nation.

New York, April 8, 1865.

[Signatures]


http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mal&fileName=mal1/415/4159500/malpage.db&recNum=0
For copyright reasons, please follow the link to The New Yorker, November 26, 1949 to see the cover image for its Thanksgiving issue.