

# SARAH JOSEPHA HALE

## Sarah Josepha Hale

**Lesson Length:** 45 Minutes

**Grade Levels:** Recommended for high school grades, though elementary and middle school teachers may be able to incorporate concepts from this lesson plan into their teaching



## Overview

In this lesson, students will learn about the trailblazer Sara Josepha Hale, a ‘practical feminist,’ writer, and activist, who fought for women’s education, prepared women for the workforce, and in keeping with her belief in the strength of households and families, was instrumental in the creation of the Thanksgiving holiday. Students will understand her educational philosophy, her view of equality between the sexes, and her methods for affecting change. They will also learn about the values that undergird the Thanksgiving tradition.

## Objectives

### Students will:

- Analyze the various ways in which Sarah Josepha Hale advocated reform within American society
- Understand how Sarah Josepha Hale viewed the relationship between the sexes
- Explain Sarah Josepha Hale’s educational philosophy
- Develop an appreciation for the purpose behind the Thanksgiving holiday
- Consider the role of the household in American life, and to an individual’s upbringing

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## Historical Background and Context

Sarah Josepha Hale was born in 1788 to parents who themselves believed in education of both sexes, and thoroughly homeschooled Hale throughout her childhood. Widowed after just nine years of marriage to lawyer David Hale, she wrote children's poetry, including the popular nurse rhyme "Mary Had a Little Lamb," before becoming the editor of *Godey's Lady Book*, a magazine in which she advocated for women's education and their right to own property. She supported patriotic and humanitarian societies and promoted American writers.

During the early 19th century in America, young girls' education was focused on preparing them for marriage and motherhood and helping them develop domestic skills that would be handy for managing the household. Women's education didn't guarantee participation in politics, nor did female teachers receive the same pay as their male counterparts. Often, their pay was remitted to their husbands. The Nineteenth Amendment had not been ratified either, so women did not have a constitutionally recognized right to vote.

A women's education advocate, Hale believed that women were the intellectual equals of men, and that they had been deprived the opportunities afforded to men. Valuing the role of teachers, she advocated training women to become teachers and educators, arguing that doing so was invaluable if the country was to educate all its children. She championed educational methods for children that reflected the joys of childhood by incorporating music and lively stories, and carefully blended entertainment with moral instruction.

Prior to its recognition as a national holiday, Thanksgiving was observed throughout the nation, and was celebrated as part of religious observances, as a recognition of bountiful harvests, and was even associated with military victories. In 1789, President George Washington sent money to imprisoned debtors, beginning the association of charity with Thanksgiving.

Hale thought a national Thanksgiving would serve to unite families who had been divided geographically as the young United States of America grew in size and territory. Even if families were separated and unable to meet, she thought Americans across the nation would take solace in knowing they were united spiritually by celebrating the same feast. She lobbied various U.S Presidents, including James Polk, Zachary Taylor, Millard Fillmore, Franklin Pierce, and James Buchanan to recognize Thanksgiving as a national holiday, before Abraham Lincoln finally did so in 1863.

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## Primary Source

*"What has made this nation great? Not its heroes, but its households."*

**Teacher Note:** Cited from Sarah Josepha Hale's 1835 book *Traits of American Life*

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## Lesson Flow (45 Minutes)

### Warm-Up (5 minutes)

Quick-write on two questions:

- How have your parents and family impacted your upbringing?
- What type of teaching style and learning environment best suit you?

### Historical Context (10 minutes)

Teacher gives presentation of Sarah Josepha Hale's upbringing, the state of women's education during the early 19th century, and the Thanksgiving tradition prior to its recognition as a national holiday.

### Primary Source Analysis (10 minutes)

Students analyze the primary source quotation and consider why Sarah Josepha Hale believed that households did not receive the praise they deserve. They should also contemplate who a society generally views its 'heroes' to be, and what the standard for heroism should be.

### Small Group Discussion (10 minutes)

Students discuss their response to the quote, and answer the observation and walk-in-the-shoes questions.

### Large Group Discussion (10 minutes)

As a class, students share any interesting responses from their small group discussions, before teacher guides larger conversation based on the discussion questions above.

## Guiding Questions

### Walk-In-The-Shoes

- Of the various causes that Sarah Josepha Hale championed, which would be of the most significance to you?
- How would you use print media to advocate for causes and issues important to you? Would social media be more effective today?
- What challenges might Sarah Josepha Hale have faced advocating for women's education?
- Sara Josepha Hale didn't rely on Congress, but would you have done so if you were in her position?

### Observation

- How did Sarah Josepha Hale influence American culture?
- What were the features of Sarah Josepha Hale's brand of 'practical feminism'?
- How does the Thanksgiving holiday embody the values that Sarah Josepha Hale held dearly?
- What do the authors and activists that Sarah Josepha Hale chose to promote have in common, if anything?

### Discussion

- How might we differentiate the two passions that Sarah Josepha Hale claimed Americans held: the love of liberty and the love of distinction?
- Given the improvement in women's rights and opportunities since the early 19th century, which women's issues might Sara Josepha Hale advocate for today and which would she likely not support?
- Do you think magazines and literature more broadly would be the most effective means today for the activism in which Sarah Josepha Hale engaged?
- How closely tied is modern feminism to Sarah Josepha Hale's practical feminism?
- What is the role of your household in your life, and why is it important?
- Are the skills that women require for the modern workforce different than the ones that Sarah Josepha Hale would have likely identified?
- Do you celebrate Thanksgiving, and if you do, how closely is your celebration to the ideal that Sarah Josepha Hale envisioned?

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## Research Base and Source Documentation

- Melanie Kirkpatrick, Education Next, “How a Lady Editor Turned Teaching into a Majority-Female Profession” - <https://www.educationnext.org/how-a-lady-editor-turned-teaching-into-a-majority-female-profession-sarah-josepha-hale/>
- Brandon Millett, Philanthropy Roundtable, “Meet the ‘Mother of Thanksgiving’: Sarah Josepha Hale” - <https://www.philanthropyroundtable.org/meet-the-mother-of-thanksgiving-sarah-josepha-hale/>
- Catherine Clinton, History Now: The Journal, “A History of the Thanksgiving Holiday” - <https://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-resources/essays/history-thanksgiving-holiday>
- Alyssa Kariofyllis, National Park Service, “Women’s Opportunities for Education Along the Battle Road” - <https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/alyssa-kariofyllis-women-of-the-battle-road-paper-3.htm>
- The Porter-Phelps-Huntington House Museum, “Embroidered Samplers and Women’s Education in 19th Century America” - <https://www.pphmuseum.org/blogging-through-the-museum/2019/8/6/embroidered-samplers-and-womens-education-in-19th-century-america>
- Arlisha R. Norwood, National Women’s History Museum, “Sarah Josepha Hale” - <https://www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/sarah-hale>