



Touched by the Better Angels: Reconciliation

Part Five of a five-part series

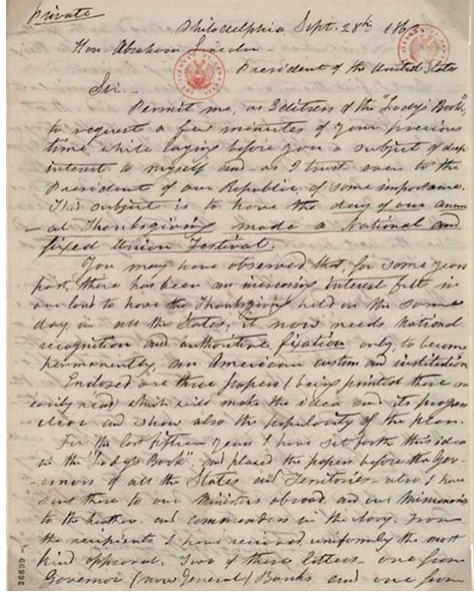
Robert C. Plumb, February 8, 2021

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Sarah Josepha Hale in 1831, by James Reid Lambdin | Richard's Free Library, Newport, New Hampshire

Starting in the antebellum period in America and continuing through the Civil War, five women performed extraordinary actions that supported the Union cause. They accomplished these acts amid the chaos and gloom during a period that left little room for anything but suffering and loss. Harriet Tubman, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Julia Ward Howe, Clara Barton, and Sarah Josepha Hale boldly made contributions that were manifested in acts of freedom, truth, inspiration, compassion, and reconciliation. And, importantly, their legacies live on today after more than a century and a half. Today we present the last in the series, Sarah Josepha Buell (Hale): Reconciliation.



Letter from Hale to President Lincoln discussing Thanksgiving | LOC

Born in 1788—six months before George Washington took his oath of office as President—Sarah Josepha Buell (Hale) was the daughter of a Revolutionary War officer and a child who shared her mother's passion for reading about history. Among young Sarah's favorite books was *The History of the American Revolution* by David Ramsay. Reading the Ramsay book and hearing her father's tales about his firsthand experiences in the Revolution would create an indelible sense of patriotism that guided her throughout her life.

Her first published book, *Northwood*, was unequivocal about the elimination of slavery (it preceded *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by 25 years), but it also attempted to depict the similarity between North and South—both born out of the Revolutionary War experience—and advocated unity between the regions. Another key element of the *Northwood* narrative was the celebration of a thanksgiving feast. Author Hale's themes in her novel reflect her

own admiration for conciliation, benevolence, charity, personal freedom, and piety. All of those characteristics, in Hale's view, manifested themselves in the expression of thanksgiving among the residents of the United States.

After her success as a novelist, Hale was offered a position as the editor-in-chief of *The American Ladies' Magazine*. The magazine flourished under Hale's editorial leadership. But economic turbulence in 1833/34 caused a decline in subscriptions and revenue. Publisher Louis Godey started a well-financed competitor, *Godey's Lady's Book*. He soon proposed a merger of the two women's magazines and offered Sarah Josepha Hale the position of editor of the combined publications. (With the Godey name on the publication's masthead.) Hale accepted the lead editorial role in this financially sound publishing venture. For the next 43 years, Hale edited the successful *Godey's Lady's Book* that had a broad and deep appeal nationwide.

Hale used her literary pulpit to advocate for women's higher education, maintain the nation's historical sites (e.g. Mount Vernon), and promote the establishment of a national day of thanksgiving. Until she wrote Abraham Lincoln in 1863, her appeals to the nation's presidents for a national day of thanksgiving (Taylor, Fillmore, Pierce, and Buchanan) never received the courtesy of a response.

By 1863 Lincoln, prescient about the need to begin pulling the country back together, saw a National Day of Thanksgiving as the beginning of healing for the Nation. In Lincoln's Thanksgiving Proclamation of October 3, 1863: "I do, therefore, invite my fellow-citizens in every part of the United States ... to set apart and observe the last Thursday of November next (November 26) as a day of thanksgiving and praise ... [We] fervently implore the interposition of the almighty hand to heal the wounds of the nation and to restore it, as soon as may be consistent with the Divine purposes, to the full enjoyment of peace, harmony, tranquility, and union."

Hale was delighted when Andrew Johnson continued the recognition of a National Day of Thanksgiving after Lincoln's assassination. She wrote: "This family union of States and Territories in our Great Republic was fixed and hallowed by the people in the ninetieth year of American Independence." The spirit and observation of a National Thanksgiving Day continue.

And that concludes our five-part series on five Civil War women whose legacies live on. We think of them when we: hear the words "Underground Railroad"; consider the impact of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*; listen to the lyrics and music of "The Battle Hymn of the Republic"; appreciate the work of the American Red Cross; and celebrate Thanksgiving Day.



Harriet Tubman, Freedom



Harriet Beecher Stowe, Truth



Julia Ward Howe, Inspiration



Clara Barton, Compassion

Content based on *The Better Angels: Five Women Who Changed Civil War America*, Potomac Books, an imprint of The University of Nebraska Press, 2020.



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