

LINCOLN LORE

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LINCOLN NATIONALIZES THANKSGIVING

Seasons of feasting and thanksgiving have been associated with the harvest season as long as food has been gathered and hoarded. The Pilgrims observed the harvest festival as a religious ceremony and largely determined the general characteristics of the feast as observed in America.

The domestic character of the thanksgiving idea retarded its national recognition, as usually it was confined to family, fraternal, or religious groups. Some of the states recognized the value of establishing a certain season for the festival, but it was not until the period of the Civil War that the national significance of the day was developed. A good picture of its nationalization is found in the following editorial of 1868:

"It is a fortunate circumstance that our national thank-offering festival has become a national affair in which the whole people participate upon a common day. This community of thanksgiving is due to the war and shows how firmly that struggle has bound together the different sections of our country. We forget that we are states and come to offer tribute to God in our capacity as a nation. The festival thus becomes more significant not only in its altered character but in its larger suggestions and motives."

The proclamation issued by Abraham Lincoln on October 3, 1863, is usually considered the first official appeal for the annual observance of a national Thanksgiving Day on the last Thursday in November. The importance of this document warrants the reprinting of the proclamation in full.

PROCLAMATION FOR THANKSGIVING

October 3, 1863

The year that is drawing toward its close has been filled with the blessings of fruitful fields and healthful skies. To these bounties, which are so constantly enjoyed that we are prone to forget the source from which they come, others have been added, which are of so extraordinary a nature that they cannot fail to penetrate and soften the heart which is habitually insensible to the ever-watchful providence of almighty God.

In the midst of a civil war of unequalled magnitude and severity, which has sometimes seemed to foreign states to invite and provoke their aggressions, peace has been preserved with all nations, order has been maintained, the laws have been respected and obeyed, and harmony has prevailed everywhere, except in the theater of military conflict; while that theater has been greatly contracted by the advancing armies and navies of the Union.

Needful diversions of wealth and of strength from the fields of peaceful industry to the national defense have not arrested the plow, the shuttle, or the ship; the ax has enlarged the borders of our settlements, and the mines, as well of iron and coal as of the precious metals, have yielded even more abundantly than heretofore. Population has steadily increased, notwithstanding the waste that has been made in the camp, the siege, and the battlefield, and the country, rejoicing in the consciousness of augmented strength and vigor, is permitted to expect continuance of years with large increase of freedom.

No human counsel hath devised, nor hath any mortal hand worked out these great things. They are the gracious gifts of the most high God, who, while dealing with us in anger for our sins, hath nevertheless remembered mercy.

It has seemed to me fit and proper that they should be solemnly, reverently, and gratefully acknowledged as with one heart and one voice by the whole American people. I do, therefore, invite my fellow-citizens in every part of the United States, and also those who are at sea

and those who are sojourning in foreign lands, to set apart and observe the last Thursday of November next as a day of thanksgiving and praise to our beneficent Father who dwelleth in the heavens. And I recommend to them that, while offering up the ascriptions justly due to him for singular deliverances and blessings, they do also, with humble penitence for our national perverseness and disobedience, commend to his tender care all those who have become widows, orphans, mourners, or sufferers in the lamentable civil strife in which we are unavoidably engaged, and 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.

In testimony whereof, I have hereunto set my hand, and caused the seal of the United States to be affixed.

Done at the city of Washington, this third day of October, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty-three, and of the independence of the United States the eighty-eighth.

A. LINCOLN.

By the President: WILLIAM H. SEWARD, Secretary of State.

There are many other appeals addressed to the American people by Abraham Lincoln which reveal the attitude of the Chief Executive towards the vital elements which constitute a national day of thanksgiving. Although disconnected, they contribute to the atmosphere permeating the period in which our national observance first found expression.

"Again the blessings of health and abundant harvest claim our profoundest gratitude to almighty God."

"It is fit and becoming in all people, at all times, to acknowledge and revere the supreme government of God; to bow in humble submission to his chastisements; to confess and deplore their sins and transgressions, in the full conviction that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom."

"We have been the recipients of the choicest bounties of Heaven. We have been preserved, these many years, in peace and prosperity. We have grown in numbers, wealth, and power as no other nation has ever grown; but we have forgotten God."

"I invite the people of the United States to assemble in their customary places of worship, and, in the forms approved by their own consciences, render the homage due to the Divine Majesty for the wonderful things he has done in the nation's behalf."

"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."

"It is the duty of nations as well as of men to own their dependence upon the overruling power of God; to confess their sins and transgressions in humble sorrow, yet with assured hope that genuine repentance will lead to mercy and pardon; and to recognize the sublime truth, announced in the Holy Scriptures and proven by all history, that those nations only are blessed whose God is the Lord."