

LINCOLN LORE

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TRIBUTES ON THANKSGIVING DAY—1863

Although seasons of thanksgiving and prayer had been observed in America from the very earliest days of its settlement, it was not until the year 1863, that the last Thursday in November was set apart as a national Thanksgiving Day to be observed annually.

We assume it would be of interest to learn just what people had to be thankful for in the midst of a great civil war. Some excerpts from contemporary papers will allow us to catch the spirit of the first National Thanksgiving Day.

Editorial in New York Herald

One of the most unique editorials appearing in the press of the day, appeared in *The New York Herald* for November 26, 1863. The editor chose from the proclamations of the President, Governors, and Mayors, excerpts, which were combined in a composite summary, not entirely free from sarcasm.

"There are a great many blessings for which the American people, or the loyal portion thereof, should this day return thanks to their Creator. With the President of the United States we think they should be thankful for fruitful fields and healthful skies and for Union victories. With the Governor of New York, we believe that citizens should make contributions for the comfort of those made destitute by the casualties of war. With the Mayor of the city of New York, we are grateful because the area of the rebellion has been circumscribed, and the spirit of anarchy subdued. We agree with the Mayor of the city of Brooklyn in praying that "the rebellion may be speedily suppressed, and the Union preserved." With the Governor of Maine, we are thankful that "so many of our oppressed countrymen have been delivered from the hands of a cruel and merciless enemy"—by means of the cartel of exchange of prisoners, we take to be his Excellency's meaning. With the Governor of Vermont, we agree thanks are due for the "suppression of the murderous spirit of riot and anarchy." With the Governor of Massachusetts, we pray that "peace shall soon return to our borders, and a union of hearts and hands revive on the ruins of that injustice and inhumanity which bred our sorrows"—although we cannot exactly make out to which side his Excellency of the Bay State particularly refers; but we object to "injustice and inhumanity" on any side. We agree with the Governors of Rhode Island and Illinois that we should be thankful because "we still have a country," and further, with the Governor of the latter State, that such a consummation has been brought about "in spite of foreign hatred and plotting treason." With the Governor of Connecticut, we are thankful for the "increasing evidence of the fidelity of the people to the government." With the Governor of New Jersey, we pray that the Creator "will give wisdom to those in authority." With the Governor of Pennsylvania, we are thankful for the "crowning mercy by which the bloodthirsty and devastating enemy was driven from the soil" of that State. It saved much trouble and confusion upon the soil of the State of New York. With the Governor of West Virginia, we do

not know but that we are tolerably grateful "for the establishment and organization of a separate Commonwealth" out of the Old Dominion. With the Governors of the States of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Iowa, Michigan, Wisconsin and Minnesota, we are thankful that those States are in a state of unexampled prosperity, notwithstanding the war. . . ."

Excerpts from Beecher's New York Sermon

"When the President's proclamation appointing this Thanksgiving day was received in England, the *London Times*, that weathercock of nations, made itself merry and scornful over the idea of giving thanks for anything in America in her present condition, and there is indeed little that would be likely to excite thanksgiving in the breasts of those to whom God has denied faith and conscience, but we find transcendent mercies mingling with our afflictions. Our night has been long, its hours dark, its dreams troubled, and its watching most weary; but it has had its stars, and they have led on the morning whose twilight is on the hills. Our day is at hand, the nation is to live . . ."

"We owe a great debt to God in our Chief Magistrate. He is wisely and surely pioneering the way of liberty to this nation. One man there was whom God's hand ordained to break our foreign bondage. If it were possible to honor one more than him whom God has ordained to break the bondage of a worse oppression in our land, then the second should be greater than the first; but joined together, one and inseparable, we shall hereafter hear the shouts of Washington and Lincoln, the fathers of their country. . . ." (Applause.)

Paragraphs from Rev. Furness' Philadelphia Address

"I do not know one that should be mentioned before the gift which the bounty of Heaven has bestowed upon us in the man who has been called at this momentous hour to occupy the highest place in the nation. If I recollect right, I believe on a former thanksgiving occasion (I think it was the first thanksgiving recommended by the President), I named the President himself as one of the blessings for which we were bound to give thanks. We have more reason to be thankful for him now than we had then . . . We cannot tell how much we owe to his indomitable patience, to his "incorrigible honesty," to that singular wisdom by which he has been guided, I think without his being aware of it himself, and by which, while studying always anxiously to observe to the utmost the constitutional limitations which he registered his oath in honor to observe, he has never left it scarcely for a moment to be doubted that all his personal aims, feelings and opinions were on the side of liberty for every man, woman and child on our soil. Never yet was imposed upon any man so difficult a problem as he has been called to solve, and never had such a problem so successful a solution. Never was the conflict of official and personal duties so well settled as it has been thus far by President Lincoln. . . ."