

# LINCOLN LORE

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## PROCLAIMING THANKSGIVING

With these words, Abraham Lincoln, on October 3, 1863, proclaimed the first national annual Thanksgiving Day as it is now observed: "I do, therefore invite my fellow-citizens . . . 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."

In his preliminary words to the above proclamation paragraph, Lincoln wrote, "It has seemed to me fit and proper" to do this. Just a few weeks later in referring to the dedication of the Gettysburg battlefield, he said, "It is altogether fitting and proper, that we do this." Evidently Lincoln borrowed from the Thanksgiving Proclamation, an expression for his Gettysburg Address which was delivered just one week before Thanksgiving Day, 1863.

It is appropriate, indeed, that the series of human interest studies of Lincoln by leading American painters, sponsored by the Lincoln National Life Insurance Company, should include in its November program, a painting of Lincoln signing the first annual national Thanksgiving Proclamation. The work is by Dean Cornwell and reveals Lincoln in deep meditation just as he finished signing the famous instrument.

The idea of Thanksgiving has so long been associated with the Pilgrim Fathers that the significance of Lincoln's contribution to the observance of the day has largely

been lost. It is hoped that the painting by Cornwell, which will be widely reproduced, will help give proper emphasis to Lincoln's efforts toward making Thanksgiving, not only a national, but an annual festival as well.

It has been argued that Washington, the father and originator of so many worthy American institutions, might also be considered the originator of Thanksgiving Day, in fact, a very beautiful folder has been published to advance this idea. That Washington did contribute directly, but possibly to a greater extent more indirectly, to the day as it is now observed, must be admitted.

On October 3, 1789, at the request of Congress, Washington set apart Thursday, November 26, as a day of "Public Thanksgiving and Prayer, to be observed by acknowledging with grateful hearts the many signal favors of Almighty God, especially by affording them an

opportunity to establish a form of government for their safety and happiness."

Lincoln, from childhood a devoted follower of Washington, evidently turned to the Thanksgiving Proclamation of 1789, for inspiration and guidance when a task of proclaiming a Thanksgiving Day evolved upon him. It must have been more than a coincidence that he issued the proclamation on the same day of the month as Washington had issued his, October 3; and set apart to be observed the same day of the month, Thursday, November 26.

This Thanksgiving Day of Washington's had no annual significance and was not especially connected with harvests, but was pointing back through all the political history of the people with special attention called to the final consummation of national idealism in the framing of the Constitution. Presidents following Washington, with possibly one exception, saw no precedent in his Thanksgiving Proclamation.

Thanksgiving Day as defined by the following recognized authorities clearly imply that the day, as we now observe it on the last Thursday of November each year, was first proclaimed by Abraham Lincoln.

"Thanksgiving Day in the United States, an annual festival of thanksgiving for the mercies of the closing year. The day is fixed by proclamation of the President and the gov-

ernors of States . . . Since 1863, the Presidents have always issued proclamations appointing the last Thursday in November as Thanksgiving Day."—*The Americana*.

"In the United States, the fourth Thursday in November is usually set apart for Thanksgiving by proclamation of the President and governors of the various states . . . President Lincoln appointed the fourth Thursday of November, 1864, and since that time each President has followed his example."—*Encyclopedia Britannica*.

"Thanksgiving Day. In the United States, a day (usually the last Thursday of November) now generally appointed or recommended annually by the Federal and State executives as a legal holiday to be set apart for Thanksgiving and praise to God for the mercies of the year past."—*Webster's Dictionary*.



"Proclaiming Thanksgiving"—Dean Cornwell