

LINCOLN LORE

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BY-PRODUCTS OF THE GETTYSBURG BATTLE

Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, delivered on November 19, 1863, preceded by just one week the first annual Thanksgiving Day. Indirectly the Battle of Gettysburg was responsible for both the famous oration and the rather obscure but impressive proclamation by Lincoln.

Frequently the value of by-products, resulting from industrial enterprise, far exceeds the commodity for which the original project was planned. As a parallel in our national life it appears as if the by-products of the Gettysburg battle will eventually over-shadow the battle itself.

An elaborate program, commemorating the seventy-fifth anniversary of the battle, was sponsored by the government this past summer; but the two equally important by-products, the dedicatory address and the Thanksgiving Proclamation, received little attention on their respective seventy-fifth anniversaries.

Abraham Lincoln had been in office but a few days over five months when he issued his first proclamation for a day "of public prayer, humiliation, and fasting" to be observed on "the last Thursday in September", 1861. On April 10, 1862 he issued a Proclamation of Thanksgiving for victories of the army and for divine guidance.

During the year 1863 proclamations setting apart days of praise and prayer were issued on three occasions. A national fast day was appointed for the last Thursday in April, and on the first Thursday in August the people were called upon to "invoke the Holy Spirit to subdue the anger which has produced and so long sustained a needless and cruel rebellion".

Immediately after the Battle of Gettysburg, Sarah Josepha Hale wrote to President Lincoln appealing to him to set apart a day of Thanksgiving. Whether the Thanksgiving Proclamation which he issued on July 15, two weeks after the battle, setting aside August 6 as a day of Thanksgiving, or whether the proclamation of October 3, setting aside the last Thursday in November as a day of Thanksgiving, was the result of Mrs. Hale's appeal is problematical; but it is safe to say that both proclamations were inspired more or less by the military contest.

Mrs. Hale should be commended for her perseverance in attempting to have Thanksgiving Day observed annually throughout the nation, but she is not the parent of this annual festival as it is now observed, although she had advocated the day of thanks as early as 1827, and subsequently appealed to congress to establish an annual festival. It was not until Abraham Lincoln came to the White House that she succeeded in securing a favorable response. With all due respect to the Pilgrims, George Washington, James Madison, and Mrs. Hale in their respective contributions to the Thanksgiving tradition, it was Abraham Lincoln who became the founder of the annual national Thanksgiving celebration as we now observe it. Not only did he issue and sign the first proclamation in 1863, but he also emphasized the annual aspect of the celebration by issuing another Thanksgiving proclamation for 1864.

The second paragraph of the first annual national Thanksgiving Proclamation observes that "In the midst of a civil war of unequalled magnitude and severity . . .

the theatre of military conflict has been . . . greatly contracted by the advancing armies and navies of the Union". The third paragraph emphasizes "the waste that has been made in camp, the siege, and the battle field", and then Lincoln commands to God "all those who have become widows, orphans, mourners or sufferers in the lamentable civil strife".

The address delivered by Lincoln at the dedication of the Gettysburg Cemetery resulted, directly of course, from the Gettysburg battle. In the second paragraph of this address Lincoln recalls that "we are engaged in a great civil war" and that "we have met on a great battle-field of that war".

It may be observed from the references to the war that the Gettysburg battle was fresh in Lincoln's mind at the time the proclamation was issued, and, after all, it may indirectly have had about as much to do with the final issuing of the Thanksgiving Proclamation as any other influence.

Aside from the military aspects of both the Thanksgiving Proclamation and the Gettysburg Address, it is evident that the latter borrowed something in the way of diction from the less famous proclamation when Lincoln said "It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this". He felt the same way about the proclamation and wrote, "It has seemed to me fit and proper", etc.

It might be truly said that the Gettysburg Address was written in the atmosphere of the Thanksgiving Proclamation and that both of these remarkable papers came out of the aftermath of the Gettysburg battle. The following brief excerpts reveal the same beauty of expression:

From the Emancipation Proclamation

"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. . . .

"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."

From the Gettysburg Address

"It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us,—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion—that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain—that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth".