

LINCOLN LORE

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MEDITATIONS FOR THANKSGIVING DAY

The forthcoming Thanksgiving Day may offer an appropriate environment for a few moments of meditation on the origin and subsequent history of this harvest anniversary abounding in holy and patriotic sentiments. Governor Bradford's proclamation to the Massachusetts Bay Colony "that all ye Pilgrims with ye wives and ye little ones do gather at ye meeting house on ye hill . . . to render thanksgiving to ye Almighty God for all his blessings" has set the pattern for more than three hundred and twenty-five years of subsequent proclamations pointing to the celebration of America's annual fall religious festival. This first proclamation expressed gratitude for "protection from the ravages of the savages" and freedom from "pestilence and disease" which had wrought such havoc during the first two years spent on the fringe of the bay. Later, other governors joined Bradford in setting apart annually by proclamation a day of Thanksgiving.

The scene changes to the Continental Congress of 1777 which set apart in December a day of prayer and praise "that under the providence of Almighty God these United States may receive the greatest of all blessings— independence and peace." Similar occasions were celebrated for six consecutive years, usually in December. The last resolution in 1783 expressed gratitude "that in the course of the present year hostilities have ceased, and we are left in the undisputed possession of liberty and independence." In 1887 another resolution spoke of "the ratification of the definite treaty of peace between the United States of America and his Britannic majesty." This paved the way for an instrument issued two years later which has been recognized as the first national Thanksgiving Proclamation issued by the President of the United States at the request of Congress.

The moving spirit in this national enterprise was Elias Boudinot, a descendant of a French Huguenot driven from Europe by religious persecution who presented a resolution in Congress on September 25, 1789, calling for "a joint committee of both Houses to be directed to wait upon the President of the United States to request that he would recommend to the people of the United States a day of public thanksgiving and prayer." This resolution embodied the idea that the nation should be thankful for "the opportunity peaceably to establish a constitution of government for their safety and happiness."

On October 3, 1789, President Washington complied with this resolution and issued a proclamation setting aside "Thursday the 26th day of November next" as the national Thanksgiving Day.

With the exception of a Thanksgiving Day proclaimed by Washington for the 19th of February, 1795, "for the seasonable control which has been given to a spirit of disorder in the suppression of the late insurrection (Whiskey Rebellion)" there was a lapse of presidential proclamations until the close of the War of 1812 when Madison set aside Thursday, April 3, 1815, as a day to thank God "for restoring to them the blessings of peace."

For nearly fifty years there were no more national Thanksgiving proclamations in America but the various states in the Union rallied to the call of the most enthusiastic exponent of the festival, Sarah Josepha Hale,

editor of *Godey's Lady Book* which magazine she utilized as a medium to publicize the festival. By the year 1856 she had been able to persuade governors of as many as twenty states to issue thanksgiving proclamations with the idea in view of nationalizing the festival.

Abraham Lincoln was the President whom Mrs. Hale encouraged to issue what has become known as the first annual Thanksgiving Proclamation. He was able to capture the New England spirit of devotion and patriotism which characterized the Pilgrim fathers and to preserve it for posterity by establishing a precedent for the annual observance of the day on the last Thursday of November.

That Lincoln was influenced by Washington's first proclamation is evident from the fact that he not only issued the document on Oct. 3, the same day utilized by Washington, but also set apart for the occasion "the last Thursday of November next" which also fell on the same day (Nov. 26) which Washington had selected.

With the exception of Andrew Johnson's choice in 1865 and U. S. Grant's designation in 1869, for a period of seventy-six years the last Thursday in November was proclaimed the national Thanksgiving day. The selection of this date had not been without careful consideration as its religious significance is familiar to those acquainted with the church calendar. The period preceding Easter known as Lent has its compliment in the preliminary period to Christmas known as Advent.

As early as the sixth century the first Sunday in Advent was established by its designation as the first Sunday following the "last Thursday in November." Inasmuch as the Friday and Saturday preceding Advent became days of fast and penance the preceding Thursday was the last day available for feasting. Hence the festal idea which was associated with the last Thursday in November.

It is not surprising that when President Franklin D. Roosevelt in both 1939 and 1940 changed the date of Thanksgiving from the last Thursday to the third Thursday, thereby destroying all the religious significance in the date, that Christian people remonstrated against it. Especially did they show their indignation when the President admitted that it had been done at the request of retail merchants who wanted a still longer pre-yule period in which to further commercialize the Christmas season which already is monopolized so greatly for mercenary ends.

Congressman Michener of Michigan offered a joint resolution in 1941 which would restore "the last Thursday in November as the annual Thanksgiving Day" and although it passed the House, the Senate amended it by striking out the word "last" and substituting the word "fourth" entirely ignoring the religious significance so clearly designated. Apparently the Senate, also was anxious to give the merchants a few more days to work on the public. The majority of last Thursdays will be fourth Thursdays. However, when the 29th or 30th of November falls on a Thursday, in celebrating the previous or fourth Thursday as Thanksgiving Day, we will be ignoring the religious significance of the approach to the Advent season.