

LINCOLN LORE

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LINCOLN'S LAST THANKSGIVING DINNER

Friends of Abraham Lincoln expressed their admiration for him in the fall of 1864 by making sure that his table would be well provided with delicacies on Thanksgiving Day. The fact that the noon day meal served on Thursday, November 24th at the White House proved to be the President's last Thanksgiving dinner, contributes something to the human interest element in the story. The Lincoln Papers in the Library of Congress reveal that from far and near parcels of food both in large and small quantities reached the executive mansion for the gala occasion, or at least sometime during the season of festivities.

Of course the most important Thanksgiving donation from the viewpoint of the youngest boy Tad, at least, was a pair of turkeys, making four drumsticks on which he could work. These turkeys were presented by Walter C. Simmons of Providence, R. I. and he advised Mr. Lincoln that they had been sent on November 21. Mr. Simmons wrote in part: "I have today taken the liberty of forwarding to you by Adams Express two Rhode Island turkeys for your Thanksgiving dinner. They are Narragansett turkeys celebrated in New England and New York markets as being the best in the world."

Apparently these live turkeys did not arrive in time for Tad to form an attachment for them as on a previous Thanksgiving occasion when he refused to have a turkey killed because it had become "a good turkey" and followed him about the White House lawn. The episode ended by the President signing a reprieve for Tom Turkey. The paper was immediately presented by Tad to the executioner and the turkey's life saved for the time being at least.

On the same day the turkeys were forwarded George B. Smith of Troy, New York sent a piece of beef, in case there were guests who did not prefer turkey. This is the note which accompanied the presentation: "I ask you to accept from me the enclosed, a choice piece of roasting beef as a small token of respect for you, not only as the chief executive but as a man, which I hope you will receive in time for Thanksgiving dinner." The day after the beef arrived Lincoln received notice from Carlos Pierce of the National Sanitary Fair at Boston that the sale of the mammoth ox "Gen. Grant" had realized over \$3,300. The President had been informed a few days before that through some voting contest at the fair the ox had been awarded to him and he immediately donated it to the fair. He must have been thankful indeed that so much money could be realized for so worthy a project. Possibly he felt the roast beef on that Thanksgiving Day, at least, was more symbolical for gratitude than the turkeys.

One of the earliest harvest gifts which may well have lasted over the Thanksgiving period, if not eaten by members of the President's cabinet, was a box of apples. They were presented by E. Bently of Tioga, Penn. and probably reached the White House about the first week in November, just before election. In fact the apples had a political flavor as indicated by the letter written by Mr. Bently. He said: "This day (Oct. 31) I have sent you by express a small box of apples. . . . The apples on top are just put in to fill up, they are fall Seek-no-further, and Lyman's Pumpkin Sweet. The green ones in one end are McClellan apples two faced and really good for nothing only show. The remainder of the box are a new variety and for want of a better name we call them 'Lincoln apples.' They are good looking, good to keep, good to eat, and very prolific. They are A. No. 1.

"Now if you are not exactly satisfied with the name you may call a cabinet council and lay the matter and the apples before them and if you and they can agree upon a better name they shall hereafter be called by it."

Previous to the gift of apples came a fruit cake presented by Mrs. Harkinson of Philadelphia who had five sons in the service. If this cake was allowed to age over a considerable period it may have graced the table. Possibly this gift may have been recalled when the President three days before Thanksgiving Day wrote the famous letter to the widow Bixby whom he had been informed had lost five sons in the service and which letter along with provisions was presented to the widow on Thanksgiving Day at Boston.

Certainly a Thanksgiving dinner in the South, and the city of Washington in that day at least was a southern city, would not be complete without sweet potatoes. The potatoes for Lincoln's table, however, came from Gloucester City, New Jersey, a whole barrel of them. They were sent by Alexander E. Powell on November 12 and were valued on the express bill of lading at \$5.00, the express charges prepaid were \$2.25.

For dessert on Thanksgiving to accompany the fruit cake there may have been some tasty dish made from canned peaches as the Lincolns received a whole case of them from H. C. Peters of York Springs, Pa. on November 21. We may feel certain nothing was lacking in the way of delicacies to make this feast a memorable one.

Some other items of food were started on their way before Thanksgiving but could not have reached the table of the Lincolns until after the festivities were over. R. C. Small representing the Sanitary Fair at San Francisco on Nov. 22 sent the President a sample of a gigantic cheese "which weighed some 4000 pounds."

The President had at least two visitors on Thanksgiving Day, who had apparently chosen the occasion as an opportunity to approach him when possibly he might be influenced by the religious atmosphere of the day. Something caused the President to write out a memorandum dated Dec. 3, 1864 with respect to his visitors. He noted: "On Thursday of last week two ladies from Tennessee came before the President, asking the release of their husbands held as prisoners of war at Johnson's Island . . . one of the ladies urged that her husband was a religious man, . . . the President ordered the release of the prisoners, when he said to this lady: 'You say your husband is a religious man; tell him when you meet him, that I say I am not much of a judge of religion, but that, in my opinion, the religion that sets men to rebel and fight against their government, because, as they think, that government does not sufficiently help some men to eat their bread in the sweat of other men's faces, is not the sort of religion upon which people can get to heaven.'" The memorandum was signed by the President.

Harper's Weekly forwarded 200,000 copies of their Thanksgiving issue to the boys in the field. It presented a two page drawing by Thomas Nast featuring the Thanksgiving festival. Aside from his own family observation of Thanksgiving Day, Lincoln must have received great satisfaction in knowing that "his boys" in the larger family circle, in which he was known as Father Abraham, were also enjoying the fruits of an abundant harvest.