

LINCOLN LORE

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SIGNIFICANCE OF THE 1864 THANKSGIVING PROCLAMATION

So much emphasis has been placed on President Lincoln's Thanksgiving Day Proclamation for 1863, which set apart the day as a national festival, that little attention has been given to the proclamation issued the following year, which gave to the celebration its annual character. The fact that there are *five* Thursdays this current year and that we are observing the *fourth* Thursday as a day of Thanksgiving instead of the *last* Thursday as the original proclamation ordered, makes it timely that the 1864 proclamation be given some notice.

The person more responsible than any one else, with the exception of the President, for both the national and the annual aspects of Thanksgiving Day was Sarah Josepha Hale, editor of *Godey's Lady's Book*. Her efforts in 1863 to nationalize the day are well known but her perseverance which prompted her to follow through on the project in 1864 is not so familiar. The Lincoln Papers in the Library of Congress make possible an approach to the story of her part in making Thanksgiving Day an annual as well as a national holiday.

The proclamation of 1863 was issued on Oct. 3, but as late as Oct. 9 the following year no evidence was available that the President was to again set apart a day of Thanksgiving. President Washington and President Madison had each issued but one proclamation for the fall festival and apparently Lincoln was about to follow the precedent set by them. In fact, the year 1864 had brought him little to be thankful for in the political or military fields, preliminary to the fall months. Possibly he had not counted on Mrs. Hale following up with such persistence the initiative she had taken the year before, or perhaps he had underestimated the power of a woman. On the above mentioned date, Oct. 9, which apparently Mrs. Hale had set for a "dead line," she wrote to Secretary Seward a letter which contained an enclosure she had prepared for her magazine on the subject of Thanksgiving. This letter is of such importance that it is copied verbatim.

"Philadelphia Oct. 9, 1864

"Hon. Wm. H. Seward, Secy. of State

"Enclosed is an article (or proof) on the national Thanksgiving. As you were last year kindly interested in this subject I ventured to request your good office again.

"My article will appear in the November issue of the 'Lady's Book' but before its publication I trust that President Lincoln will have issued his proclamation appointing the last Thursday in November as the Day. I send a copy of the proof for the President. You will greatly oblige me by handing this to him and acquainting him with the contents of the letter. I do not like to trouble him with a note. Should the President see fit to issue his proclamation at once the important paper would have time to reach the knowledge of American citizens in Europe and Asia as well as throughout our wide land. If the President should recommend that all American ministers and consuls etc. should observe the day in their respective offices in foreign countries, would it not have a good effect on our citizens abroad, and if on

land and seas wherever the American flag wafts over an American citizen all should be invited and unite in this national Thanksgiving would it not be a glorious festival.

"Hastily but truly yours,
"Sarah Josepha Hale."

Mrs. Hale had used to great advantage the columns of her magazine in emphasizing the Thanksgiving festival in 1863 and so in 1864 she began to publicize the festivities. She took particular pains to urge that the Thanksgiving Day in 1864 as in 1863 should fall on "this fixed date, the last Thursday in November." She further commented, "It is the peculiar happiness of Thanksgiving Day that nothing political mingles in its observance."

Mr. Seward evidently carried out his part in the assignment suggested by Mrs. Hale in her letter and by the time Lincoln was ready to issue the proclamation on October 20 both the political and military fortunes of the Union had taken on a more optimistic appearance. Two proclamations in consecutive years coming from the President seemed a good omen that an *annual* Thanksgiving Day was now established as well as a *national* observance of the occasion. Both proclamations set apart the "last Thursday in November" as the day on which the festivities were to be held.

Two seasons of equal religious significance find their place in the church calendar; Lent, preceding Easter and Advent, preceding Christmas, both periods emphasizing fasting and prayer. 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 this Sunday become days of fast and penance, the preceding Thursday was the last day available for feasting. Hence the feasting idea which was associated with the *last* Thursday in November. For three quarters of a century this sacred day was set apart in the United States as an occasion for Thanksgiving and the time of its observance seemed as secure as the closing day of the Advent season, Christmas.

While Mrs. Hale had commented on "a fixed date" and rejoiced that nothing "political mingled in its observance" she would have been shocked indeed if she could have known that in 1939 Thanksgiving Day was to be lifted from its historic and religious setting and moved to the *third* Thursday in November which has no traditional religious significance. In 1941 the House passed a resolution which would "restore the last Thursday in November as the annual Thanksgiving Day." The Senate, however, amended the bill striking out the word "last" and changing it to "fourth" and the President signed the bill. This date likewise had no religious significance except when the *fourth* Thursday also became the *last* Thursday.

The fact that there are five Thursdays in the month of November this year has invited these comments and we find ourselves in the same position as we occupied, when observing the third Thursday in 1939, celebrating Thanksgiving prematurely. The actual Thanksgiving Day determined by the religious tradition of many centuries actually falls in the year 1951, on Thursday, November 29.