

LINCOLN LORE

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LINCOLN'S ATTRIBUTE OF THANKFULNESS

One of the characteristics which Abraham Lincoln revealed in both his writings and behavior was the attribute of thankfulness. His discerning parents must have cultivated this desirable quality when he was but a child. There is evidence that each day Thomas Lincoln, the father, paused before their frugal meals to thank God for such blessings as were provided. There has come down from Dennis Hanks, a member of the household, a tradition that on one occasion, when the food on the table was limited to potatoes, Abe commented after the usual grace had been pronounced, "I call them mighty poor blessings."

A copy of the *Uncollected Letters of Abraham Lincoln* by Gilbert A. Tracy in the Foundation Library bears the signature of Theodore Roosevelt. Several passages in the book are pencil marked presumably by him. One of his delineations is this paragraph in a letter written by Lincoln in 1857 to Hannah Armstrong in her troubled situation:

"Gratitude for your long-continued kindness to me in adverse circumstances prompts me to offer my humble services gratuitously. . . . It will afford me an opportunity to requite, in a small degree, the favors I received at your hand, and that of your lamented husband when your roof afforded me a grateful shelter, without money and without price."

The most enduring memorial to Lincoln's spirit of gratefulness is his Proclamation of Thanksgiving issued on Oct. 3, 1863, setting apart, on the last Thursday of November in that year, what proved to be America's first annual national Thanksgiving festival. After enumerating the many "gracious gifts of the most high God" the President continued, "It has seemed to me fit and proper that they should be solemnly, reverently and gratefully acknowledged."

About a month before Lincoln issued his proclamation he wrote a letter to

James C. Conkling in which he expressed appreciation for those who "lent a hand" in the progress of the Union cause: He mentioned, "The great northwest. . . New England, Empire, Keystone and Jersey . . . the Sunny South too . . ." and continued, "The job was a great national one and let none be banned who bore an honorable part in it." Lincoln then concluded the paragraph with this expression of appreciation: "Thanks to all. For the great republic—for the principle it lives by, and keeps alive—for man's vast future—thanks to all."

The issuing of the proclamation of the following year, 1864, called for the observance of the same last Thursday in November as Thanksgiving Day and its reoccurrence assured the annual aspect of the festival. The President signed this proclamation on October 20 and two days later, while still in the spirit of the message

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calling for the giving of thanks, wrote a letter to General Sheridan overflowing with gratitude. The general by a decisive victory on Oct. 19 had brought the Shenandoah Valley campaign to a close and the President acknowledged his appreciation in these words:

"With great pleasure I tender to you and your brave army the thanks of the nation, and my own personal admiration and gratitude."

But the Thanksgiving season of 1864, the last festival of this kind that Lincoln was to enjoy, created an atmosphere which was to produce a far more famous writing. On November 21 he wrote his remarkable letter to the widow, Lydia Bixby of

Boston, whom Lincoln had been advised had lost five sons in the war. The letter was delivered to her personally by Adjutant-General Schouler, the morning following Thanksgiving Day.

So much controversy has developed about various facets associated with the episode, that attention has been diverted until the casual reader and the Lincoln student as well may have failed to appreciate the beauty of this real gem of English literature. We might think of the letter as the finest illustration extant of Abraham Lincoln's attribute of thankfulness. Penned as it was almost on the eve of Thanksgiving Day, it is not strange that the religious fervor of the season should find expression in Lincoln's petition to God for the sorrowful widow. It was the President's prayer "that Our Heavenly Father assuage the anguish of your bereavement, and leave you only the cherished memory of the loved and lost, and the solemn pride that must be yours to have laid so costly a sacrifice on the altar of freedom."

Yet Lincoln contemplated: "How weak and fruitless must be any word of mine which should attempt to begile you from the grief of a loss so overwhelming." He did however, in keeping with the season declare, "I cannot refrain from tendering you the consolation that may be found in the thanks of the republic they died to save."

On the very day Lincoln was assassinated he wrote a letter to General Van Alen, probably the last formal correspondence he composed, which was very appropriately a voluntary letter of appreciation and thanks. The concluding sentence follows:

"I thank you for the assurance you give me that I shall be supported by conservative men like yourself, in the efforts I may make to restore the Union, so as to make it, to use your language, a union of hearts and hands as well as of states."