



THANKSGIVING DAY

CULTURAL RESOURCES

For Sunday, November 23 or Thursday, November 27, 2008

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I. Historical Background and Documents

The spirit of thanksgiving and praise expressed in this Thanksgiving Day scripture is clearly evident throughout the history of America. In Isaiah 12:4, the prophet says, “And you will say in that day: Give thanks to the Lord, and call on his name; make known his deeds among the nations; proclaim that his name is exalted.” From the inception of our nation, Americans have born witness to this admonition. The thirty-eight English settlers who landed at Berkeley Plantation in Virginia on December 4, 1619 wrote a charter which mandated that this date should be observed annually as a day of thanksgiving to God. Two years later, in 1621, a three-day festival of thanksgiving was held in Plymouth, Massachusetts. Governor William Bradford hosted this harvest festival to thank God for

all the blessings he had bestowed upon the young colony. According to The World Book Encyclopedia, the menu consisted of “ducks, geese, and turkeys” and “five deer” from the forest; “wild plums,” “leeks” and “watercress” from the fields; and “clams, eel and other fish” from area streams and the Atlantic Ocean. Women cooked this bounty and pans of cornbread over outdoor fires.¹

In 1789, President George Washington issued the following general proclamation declaring November 26 a national day of thanksgiving:

General Thanksgiving
By the President of the United States of America
A Proclamation

WHEREAS it is the duty of all nations to acknowledge the providence of Almighty God, to obey His will, to be grateful for His benefits, and humbly to implore His protection and favor; and Whereas both Houses of Congress have, by their joint committee requested me ‘to recommend to the people of the United States a DAY OF PUBLICK THANKSGIVING and PRAYER, to be observed by acknowledging with grateful hearts the many and signal favors of Almighty God, especially by affording them an opportunity peaceably establish a form of government for their safety and happiness.’

NOW THEREFORE, I do recommend and assign THURSDAY, the TWENTY-SIXTY DAY of NOVEMBER next, to be devoted by the people of these States to the service of that great and glorious Being who is the beneficent author of all that was, that is, or that will be; that we may then all unite in rendering unto Him our sincere and humble thanks for His kind care and protection of the people of this country previous to their becoming a nation; for the signal and manifold mercies and the favorable interpositions of His providence in the course and conclusion of the late war; for the great degree of tranquility, union, and plenty which we have since enjoyed; -- for the civil and religious liberty with which we are blessed, and the means we have of acquiring and diffusing useful knowledge; -- and, in general, for all the great and various favors which he has been pleased to confer upon us.

And also, that we may then unite in most humbly offering our prayers and supplications to the great Lord and Ruler of Nations and beseech Him to pardon our national and other transgressions; -- to enable us all, whether in publick or private stations, to perform our several and related duties properly and punctually; to render our National Government a blessing to all the people by constantly being a Government of wise, just, and constitutional laws, discreetly and faithfully executed and obeyed; to protect and guide all sovereigns and nations (especially such as have shewn kindness unto us); and to bless them with good governments, peace, and concord; to promote the knowledge and practice of true religion and virtue, and the increase of science among them and us; and, generally

to grant unto all mankind such a degree of temporal prosperity as he alone knows be best.

GIVEN unto my hand, at the city of New-York, the third day of October, in the year of our Lord, one thousand seven hundred and eighty-nine. ²

Two additional American Presidents joined President George Washington in bestowing official recognition upon Thanksgiving Day. In 1863, during the Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln became the second American President to issue a Thanksgiving Day Proclamation. Urged by Sarah Josepha Hale, ³ the editor of Godey's Lady's Book and perhaps best known for her poem, "Mary Had a Little Lamb," President Lincoln issued the following proclamation:

Lincoln's Thanksgiving Proclamation
Washington, DC – October 3, 1863

The year 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 can not fail to penetrate and soften even the heart which is habitually insensible to the ever-watchful providence of Almighty God.

In the midst of a civil war of unequalled magnitude and severity, which has sometimes seemed foreign states to invite and to provoke their aggression, peace has been preserved with all nations, order has been maintained, the laws have been respected and obeyed, and harmony has prevailed everywhere, except in the theater of military conflict, while that theater has been greatly contracted by the advancing armies and navies of the Union.

Needful diversions of wealth and of strength from the fields of peaceful industry to the national defense have not arrested the plow, the shuttle, or the ship; the ax has enlarged the borders of our settlements, and the mines, as well as the iron and coal as of our precious metals, have yielded even more abundantly than heretofore. Population has steadily increased notwithstanding the waste that has been made in the camp, the siege, and the battlefield, and the country, rejoicing in the consciousness of augmented strength and vigor, is permitted to expect continuance of years with large increase of freedom. No human counsel hath devised nor hath any mortal hand worked out those great things. They are the gracious gifts of the Most High God, who, while dealing with us in anger for sins, hath nevertheless remembered mercy.

It has seemed to me fit and proper that they should solemnly, reverently, and gratefully acknowledged, as with one heart and one voice, by the whole American people. I do therefore invite my fellow-citizens in every part of the United States, and also those who are in foreign lands, to set apart and observe the last Thursday

of November next as a day of thanksgiving and praise to our beneficent Father who justly dwelleth in the heavens. And I recommend to them that while offering ascriptions justly due to Him for such singular deliverances and blessings they do also, with humble penitence for our national perverseness and disobedience, commend to His tender care all those who have become widows, orphans, mourners, or suffers in the lamentable civil strife in which we are unavoidably engaged, and fervently implore the imposition of the Almighty hand to heal the wounds of the nation and to restore it, as soon as may be consistent with the divine purpose, to the full enjoyment of peace, harmony, tranquility, and union.

In testimony whereof I have hereunto set my hand and caused the seal of the United States to affixed.

Done at the city of Washington, this 3rd day of October, A.D. 1863, and of the independence of the United States the eighty-eighth.”⁴

In 1939, President Franklin D. Roosevelt, sought to stimulate the Christmas economy by setting up the nation’s Thanksgiving Day observance. And, in 1941, on the eve of World War II, Senator John Anthony Danaher (Rep. Conn.) introduced a bill that Congress enacted making Thanksgiving Day a legal federal holiday. The bill reads:

Joint Resolution

Making the fourth Thursday of November a legal holiday.

Resolved by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled, That the fourth Thursday of November in each year after 1941 be known as Thanksgiving Day, and is hereby made a legal public holiday to all intents and purposes and in the same manner as the 1st of Day of January, the 22nd day of February, the 30th of May, the 4th day of July, the first Monday of September, the 11th day of November, and Christmas Day are now made by law public holidays.

Approved, December 26, 1941. (Bill-No:77 H.J. Res. 41/Public-Law No:77 PL 379)

II. A Thanksgiving Remembrance

The preparation, sharing and eating of Thanksgiving meals are important annual family rituals. For example, the serving of certain dishes can evoke fond memories of deceased family members. When my wife, Janice, bakes a pound cake, the family shares stories of Grandmother Mary Slaughter, the matriarch of the Slaughter Family for which our daughter Mary Ellyn is named, and life in Hopkinsville, the Western Kentucky town from which she and her children migrated to Indianapolis. By the same token, pots of gumbo prepared by my son Wesley, nephew Fred, or niece Joan out in Tucson, Arizona call to mind such stories that my mother, Mabel Leora Washington, whom we all affectionately call “Mama Wig” told us, “The Louisiana gumbo prepared by her mother

Pauline – she lived in Port Allen on the banks of the Mississippi River – was so rich it would make diners who were not use to it break out in hives.” And that her father, “Papa,” would wash down this Creole delicacy with countless ball jars filled to their brim with ice-cold sugar water, which was so rich you could see the sugar waving around in the glass. “Papa’s reasoning for such a sweet libation was, ‘I don’t want to sprain my tongue’.” And thus it is for countless other African American families on Thanksgiving Day.

III. Prose and Poetic Excerpts

When I consider the soul food that has and will fill many tables on Thanksgiving Day, I am reminded of Julia Fields’ poem, “High on the Hog,” which uses Soul Food as apt metaphor for racial progress:

High on the Hog

Take my share of Soul Food

I do not wish

to taste of pig

of either gut

or grunt

from bowel

or jowl

I want caviar

Shrimp scoufflé

Sherry

Champagne

And not because

these are the

Whites’ domain

but just because

I’m entitled. . .

To eat

High on the Hog. . . .⁵

IV. Songs for This Calendar Moment

Walter Hawkins' gospel song, "Thank You Lord," is an excellent example of the type of gospel songs that are fitting for this occasion. It allows us to be thankful, yet calls us to never forget those who are less fortunate.

Thank You Lord

Tragedies are common place
All kinds of diseases
People are slipping away
Economy's down
People can't get enough pay
As for me, all I can say is
Thank you Lord for all you done for me.

Folks without homes
Out in the streets
And the drug habit some say
They just can't beat
Muggers and robbers
No place seems to be safe
But you been my protection
Every step of the way
I wanna say, Thank you Lord for all you done for me.

That coulda be me, with no shoes
And no clothes,
Or just another number, outdoors,
Thank you Lord for all you done for me.⁶

Traditional Songs

The A.M. E. Hymnal published the following two hymns whose words exalt the words of Isaiah 12: 1-6, the lectionary scripture for this occasion.

For All the Blessings of the Year

For all the blessings of the year, for all the friends we hold dear,
For peace on earth, both far and near, we thank thee, Lord.
For life and health, those common things, which every day and hour brings
For home, where our affection clings, we thank thee, Lord.
For love of thine, which never tires, which all our better thoughts inspires,
And warms our lives with heavenly fires, we thank thee, Lord."⁷

We Gather Together

We gather together to ask the Lord's blessing;
He chastens and hastens his will to make known;
The wicked oppressing now cease from distressing,
Sing praises to his name: he forgets not his own.

Beside us to guide us, our God with us joining;
Ordaining, maintaining his kingdom divine;
So from the beginning the fight we were winning:
Thou, Lord, wast at our side, all glory be thine!

We all do extol thee, thou leader triumphant,
And pray that thou still our defender wilt be,
Let thy congregation escape tribulation:
Thy name be ever praised! O Lord, make us free! Amen”

--Anonymous

V. Possible Program Illustrations

Cornucopia
Family seated at Thanksgiving dinner

Notes

1. World Book, Inc. The World Book Encyclopedia. Chicago: World Book, 2008.
2. United States. President George Washington. General Thanksgiving By the President of the United States of America A Proclamation. Washington, 1789.
3. Emery, Michael. "Hale, Sarah Josepha." The World Book Encyclopedia. Chicago: World Book, 2008.
4. United States. President Abraham Lincoln. Lincoln's Thanksgiving Proclamation. Washington, DC, 1863.
Online location: <http://www.infoplease.com/spot/tgproclamation.html> accessed 1 June 2008.
5. Fields, Julia. "High on the Hog." Trouble the Water: 250 Years of African-American Poetry. Ed. Jerry W. Ward, Jr. New York: Penguin Books USA, Inc., 1997. p. 355
6. "Thank You Lord." By Walter Hawkins.
Online location:
http://www.6lyrics.com/music/walter_hawkins/lyrics/thank_you_lord2.aspx accessed 1 June 2008.
7. "For All the Blessings of the Year." By Albert H. Hutchinson and Robert N. Quaile. A.M.E. Hymnal with Responsive-Scripture Readings Adopted in Conformity with the Doctrine and Usages of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. Philadelphia: The A.M.E. Sunday School Union, 1954.

