

NEWSLETTER

Friends of Civil War Alcatraz

November 2017

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Thanksgiving During the Civil War

During the 1840's and 1850's, there was a cultural war going on about the real origins of the United States. In the North, scholars credited the Puritans with establishing the foundations of our government as a social contract and as a democracy (as seen in the Mayflower Compact). Southern scholars, however, promoted the idea that the United States began with the English colony of Jamestown — a decade before the Pilgrim colony at Plymouth — and that the embrace of English Christianity by Pocahontas was proof of its superiority and its destiny to rule the continent. These competing ideas became more and more heated in the 1850's. The South would not allow the origins of our country to begin in Yankee New England with its miserable factories and its cruel capitalism. And the North would never concede that our country began in the slave South, with its exploitation of African men, women, and children. In both narratives, though, there was an understood notion that the nation began as a white, Protestant Christian nation and would continue as such.

The motivation of these narratives could be understood in the context of the day: the North was being overwhelmed by Catholic Irish and German immigrants; in the South the Pocahontas story was justification to remove and marginalize anyone who was not a white Christian. Both advanced the idea of an Anglo-Saxon, Protestant nation. And because the North won the war, it is the Pilgrim story of Thanksgiving that was advanced in schools and in literature.

New England had begun the seasonal tradition of a dinner to replicate that famous harvest festival between the Pilgrims and the Native Americans in 1621. Typically after a long morning church service, New Englanders would return home for a meal that in some ways imitated the first Thanksgiving (to see what that meal consisted of, go to the Smithsonian website: <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/what-was-on-the-menu-at-the-first-thanksgiving-511554/>) The meal in Massachusetts, for example, would consist of gourd soup, wild turkey, cranberries, potatoes, yams, green beans, and Indian pudding or apple pie — pretty much today's standard holiday meal.

It was in the midst of the Civil War, 1863, that President Lincoln proclaimed the last Thursday of November to be “a day of Thanksgiving and Prayer”. It might seem odd to make such a proclamation months after Gettysburg, with its 52,000 casualties, and the draft riots in New York, and no real end in sight of the war. But Lincoln was always looking for ways to bind the nation together, and he avoided any mention of Pilgrims or Indians or North or South. Instead, he asked Americans “to commend to [God's] tender care all those who have become widows, orphans, mourners or sufferers in the lamentable civil strife” that the nation faced. He asked for a day in which we might all sit down and work to “heal the wounds of the nation.” Eventually Thanksgiving became a national holiday when President Roosevelt made it so in 1939 during another American disaster — the Great Depression.

Dates to Remember

November 10 - 12
Civil War Roundtable
Conference in Sacramento

November 11
Veteran's Day

November 18
Jr. Ranger Day on Alcatraz

Nov. 23 Thanksgiving
Alcatraz closed

Thursday, Nov. 30, 2017
San Francisco Civil War
Roundtable Lecture: “Jessie
Fremont's Abolitionists' Cell”



Alfred R. Waud, an artist during the Civil War, sketched this scene of a Thanksgiving meal at a Union Camp in 1861. *image from the Library of Congress*

The tradition of sending Thanksgiving meals to the troops began during the Civil War. In 1864 organizations such as the Union Club of New York began massive campaigns to get Thanksgiving meals to the troops. New York alone sent three ships with 400,000 pounds of food — turkey, ham, potatoes, apple pies, fruits, nuts, etc. — to Grant’s Headquarters in Virginia, to be distributed to all the troops in his command.

We don’t have any known records of Thanksgiving on Alcatraz, but because we know that farms in the Bay Area were supplying good amounts of grain, meat, vegetables, and fruit — and that there were big ovens and kitchens in the Citadel — the troops on the island probably ate some kind of holiday meal. No doubt they were eating better than their compatriots on the battlefields in the East.

Resources

“How the Civi War Created Thanksgiving” by Kenneth C. Davis, in *The New York Times*
<https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/11/25/how-the-civil-war-created-thanksgiving/?login=email>

“Thanksgiving and Civil War” by Professor Honor Sachs in *The Huffington Post*
https://www.huffingtonpost.com/honor-sachs/thanksgiving-and-civil-wa b_6232524.html

Events

The Civil War Roundtable Conference in Sacramento will have many Civil War authors speaking on a variety of topics. For information/registration go to <http://www.sbcwrt.org/sbwp/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/2017-West-Coast-Conference-Flyer.pdf>

Junior Ranger Day on Alcatraz, November 18th, needs volunteers! Please call Ranger Wendy at Alcatraz 415-561-4900, press 1 and ask for Ranger Wendy or Ranger Lori. They would especially like some Civil War soldiers on the island to do cannon drills.

San Francisco Civil War Roundtable is hosting a lecture by Elaine Elinson, author of “Wherever There’s A Fight” on the topic of Jessie Benton and her abolitionist fight in California. It was Benton, living in what is now Fort Mason, who brought Thomas Starr King to California to spread the message of abolition to the people of Northern California. This is a story little known to many Californians and promises to be a worthwhile evening. See info on the SFCWR Facebook page, under “events”.

Please note: There will be no December newsletter.