



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

Thanksgiving in 1853

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In 1853, 10 years before President Abraham Lincoln declared Thanksgiving a national holiday, Alexandria debated whether to observe the increasingly celebrated holiday. The debate included regional preferences, arguments about religious piety and the consumption of alcohol. Finally, on Nov. 16, Mayor John Muir, not the naturalist, declared that Alexandria would celebrate the holiday on Nov. 24.

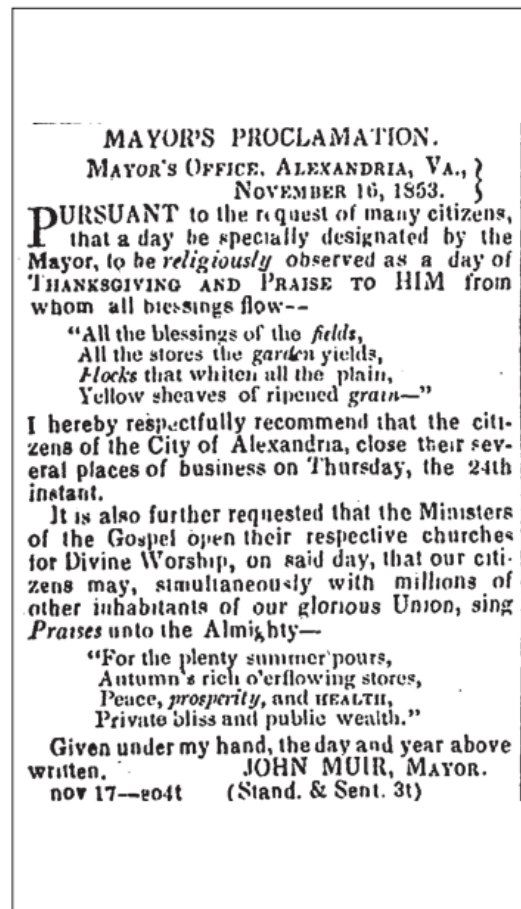
While Virginia claims the first Thanksgiving celebration in 1619 at Berkeley Plantation, by the early 19th century, the holiday was firmly associated with the Plymouth settlement in Massachusetts in particular, and New England in general. As regional tensions over slavery and other issues grew, so did resistance to celebrating a “Yankee” holiday in the American South.

Similar to other NorthSouth disagreements, Virginia found itself the epicenter of the debate. Strengthening the resistance to the holiday was Virginia’s insistence that it, not Massachusetts, was the cradle of the United States. The increase in regional differences also led some Southern leaders to discourage wealthy families from sending their children to Ivy League universities or hiring Northern tutors for their children.

In 1853, Virginia Gov. Joseph Johnson cited Thomas Jefferson’s support of the separation of church and state in his refusal to declare Thanksgiving a state holiday. The Richmond Daily Dispatch used a different argument against Thanksgiving, arguing that:

The non-celebration of a Day of Thanksgiving is no proof of indifference or ingratitude ... The grand festival of the South is Christmas, and we hope it will always be retained at the head of the calendar.

Muir’s mayoral proclamation recommended the closing of businesses for the holiday. It also asked that houses of worship conduct services to “sing Praises unto the Almighty.” Five years later, the tide had turned against the holiday in Alexandria. That year, Mayor William D. Massey requested the Common Council approve a city holiday, which included the closing of businesses. The Council rejected Massey’s



Mayor John Muir’s proclamation of the city holiday in the Nov. 17, 1853. *Alexandria Gazette*. Photo/Office of Historic Alexandria.



Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

request by a 10-3 vote. Given the regional animosity over the holiday, it was many years after the Civil War before Alexandria overtly celebrated the holiday again.

“Out of the Attic” is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as “Marking Time” and explored Alexandria’s history through collection items, historical images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into “Out of the Attic” and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.

These articles appear with the permission of the Alexandria Times and were authored by staff of the Office of Historic Alexandria and invited guests.