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Presidents' Day in a Land at War

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Presidents' Day in a Land at War

Abstract

Monday is Presidents' Day, our modern conglomeration of the celebrations of Washington's and Lincoln's Birthdays. Of course, no one but Mary Todd, Tad and some friends were celebrating Lincoln's birthday in 1863. Dying has a way of making special family events into cherished national holidays. Hence Washington, father of the nation who was already cold in the ground, warranted celebration and accolades on his birthday. [excerpt]

Keywords

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Disciplines

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Interpreting the Civil War: Connecting the Civil War to the American Public is written by alum and adjunct professor, John Rudy. Each post is his own opinions, musings, discussions, and questions about the Civil War era, public history, historical interpretation, and the future of history. In his own words, it is "a blog talking about how we talk about a war where over 600,000 died, 4 million were freed and a nation forever changed. Meditating on interpretation, both theory and practice, at no charge to you."

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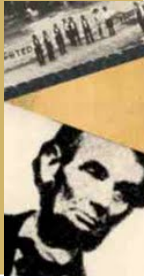
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THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 14, 2013

Monday is Presidents' Day, our modern conglomeration of the celebrations of Washington's and Lincoln's Birthdays. Of course, no one but Mary Todd, Tad and some friends were celebrating Lincoln's birthday in 1863. Dying has a way of making special family events into cherished national holidays. Hence Washington, father of the nation who was already cold in the ground, warranted celebration and accolades on his birthday.

But America was a land divided. Washington's gambit at a free and independent republic in the New World was in limbo. And the fate of the concept of freedom hung in the balance

*My country, 'tis of thee,
Sweet land of liberty,*

Of thee I sing;

In early February, the U.S. Congress passed a Conscription Act. Now any American male of military age could be coerced into service, forced into fighting for a cause he might not find just. The rich could buy their way out; the poor were left largely to brave the bullets.

*Land where my fathers died,
Land of the pilgrims' pride,*

Joseph Hooker had just taken command of an army that has seen perhaps its worst winter. Battered at Fredericksburg and bitterly politically divided, the Army of the Potomac looked very much worse for wear. Hooker reorganizes and regroups, knowing full well another season of heavy fighting lies in store.

*From ev'ry mountainside
Let freedom ring!*



Washington as depicted in Harpers Weekly the following year, 1864.

And in Gettysburg, the people gather to honor their sainted father. On the 25th of February, the students of Pennsylvania College held a rousing ceremony for their nation and their dead chieftain. "It was rather a hastily planned affair," the *Lutheran and Missionary* noted, "as student celebrations are apt to be." Still, if the celebration wasn't "elaborate in design and detail, [it] was eminently successful in execution." In spite of a distinct lack in, "stage effect," the students' enthusiasm and patriotism carried the day.

*Let music swell the breeze,
And ring from all the trees
Sweet freedom's song;*

In front of Pennsylvania Hall, known as the College Edifice in 1863, a grove of trees sat barren in the cold mid-winter. Echoing through the branches at 10 am, the college bell peeled forth. Students streamed across the brown and white wintery campus toward Christ Church on Chambersburg Street.

*Let mortal tongues awake;
Let all that breathe partake;*

After prayer, the crowd of students and professors broke forth into song, the patriotic hymn *My Country 'Tis of Thee* ringing in the rafters of the Lutheran church. Half that country was at war with the land these young men loved. Half that nation wanted to break away and craft a new nation. But still the students sang.

*Let rocks their silence break,
The sound prolong.*

Then speeches followed. Someone read President Washington's Farewell Address. The dead President intoned solemn words of unity through a living voice. "The North," he said, saw industry grow thanks to, "an unrestrained intercourse with the South, protected by the equal laws of a common government." So to, the South, "in the same intercourse, benefiting by the agency of the North, sees its agriculture grow and its commerce expand." How those words must have stung.

The ghost of Washington closed, hoping that his words might help, "to moderate the fury of party spirit, to warn against the mischiefs of foreign intrigue, to guard against the impostures of pretended patriotism." From the grave, he couldn't see the nation torn asunder by party spirit, a benighted institution and the evils of unchecked sectional patriotism.

*Our fathers' God to Thee,
Author of liberty,
To Thee we sing.*

Then the college's president rose. Henry Lewis Baugher addressed the crowd. He, "showed the points of resemblance between this revolution and the first," a student recorded, "how the same domestic treason, base slander and misrepresentation existed then as now." The man of god damned the idea of disunion and, "proved the utter fallacy of the right of secession, and the great wickedness of rebellion."

*Long may our land be bright,
With freedom's holy light,*

Other professors spoke, underlining Washington's character as an exemplar. Undoubtedly, they tiptoed past his role as a slave master, focusing instead upon the, "most prominent of his virtues." But then, noon approached and the students rushed off to eat.

*Protect us by Thy might,
Great God our King.*

The afternoon was a personal celebration where the morning was communal. "Sleighbing," the student recounted to the *Lutheran and Missionary*, "seemed quite a prominent feature." Throughout the College Edifice, the dormitory rooms were crowded with knots of students, "from which came many a hearty laugh and token of mirth."

Gettysburg enjoyed one more day of peace and celebration in a land bitterly torn by war.