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VOICES FROM HISTORY: THANKSGIVING - PUBLISHED 11/7/2018

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Since the Thanksgiving holiday began as a New England observance, and Sarah Davis was by birth and upbringing a Yankee girl, she continued the tradition after she married and moved west to Illinois. She wrote about her memories of Thanksgiving and the letters that she received from family back East in Berkshire Co. MA, often mentioned the holiday.

Here is a small collection of some of the unique and, in one case, helpful excerpts from the letters. I think that once you read this, you will have insight into the role that Thanksgiving played and the place that it had in the heart of Sarah Davis, and New Englanders in general.

I am almost sorry that Thanksgiving comes about this time because persons in health can hardly get through with it without a disordered system, or, at least stomach. Therefore I caution you to take care what, and how much you eat, especially as you are exposed to take the fever from your room mate.[1] Be careful of exposing yourself to take cold – and if you feel but slightly indisposed take what your mother[2] has recommended; but if you have head and back ache, take a moderate dose of rhubarb in molasses, or rhubarb and lemon steeped together with plenty of molasses; or if bones ache and ague[3], take a good dose of bonesett [sic][4] hot on going to bed, after putting your feet in warm water; particularly if you nor your landlady do not know what to do apply in season to a physician. But I do not wish you to take calomel if it can be avoided, and tell your physician so if you are obliged to employ one.[5]... My last and most important advice is – be ready to die: and that is the way to be prepared to live. Hartford CT, November 25, 1834 (BC 1) LC-ALC

We were intending to go to Lenox to Thanksgiving the day before I left home, but it was so stormy we could not- so we eat [probably pronounced “et”, past tense] our own Turkey not in silence for our children are never silent, but with hearts rather sad on account of our approaching separation. [Julius Rockwell would have been leaving soon to return to

Washington DC. See the Correspondent Key below.] Washington DC, December 8, 1845
(AL 1) JR-SWD

Your Uncle Daniel[6] wrote that you were to spend Thanksgiving at his house – I am certain that you had a pleasant day there – I am very grateful to your friends for taking so much pains to make you contented and happy – and I trust you will neglect no opportunity, to show them that you are not unmindful of their kindness – I always think of your Grandparents on each Thanksgiving festival – and the days of my childhood come with that remembrance – My Father[7] in the prime of life, tall erect and dignified sat opposite your Grandmother[8] (who was always in my eyes, the prettiest and pleasantest woman in the world) and then nearest her sat my Grandmother Walker[9] with Sunday cap and gown – with as fair skin and black eyes as you often see, and your great Grandfather[10] sat on the other side of the table always dignified, with a pleasant word and smile for all – There were ranged around in their proper places eight children[11]- each trying to behave with propriety, and as happy as any children could well be – Each was helped in turn – and did ample justice to the good things provided – The older ones conversed and the young ones listened - Bloomington, December 5, 1854 (AL c) SWD-GPD

[My dear husband] This is Thanksgiving evening –.... I thought I would invite Mr. Ewing & his family to dinner - & we had quite a table full. Mrs. Birdsall, Mrs. Colton, Rachel & I dined at the first table. Bill of fare – Tea & Coffee Breast Pea fowl – Boiled chickens – Cold Tongue Roast Beef Potatoes, cold slaw – Pickles Stewed Cherries & Jelly – Apple & Mince pies. (before 1856-Love Colton there, so is Mrs. Birdsall) Bloomington, November 28, 1850 (ALPL) SWD-DD

[1] Aaron Lucius Chapin was a student at Yale University at this time. He was a member of the graduating class of 1837.

[2] Laura Colton [Mrs. Laertes] Chapin, mother of A.L. Chapin.

[3] Intermittent fever; often used in the same sense as chill or rigor. [Dunglison1874] <http://www.antiquusmorbus.com/english/EnglishA.htm>

[4] Also known as “ague weed”, it was a popular remedy used for treating fevers by early settlers and Native Americans.

[5] Good advice as calomel is mercurous chloride. It was not only used as a purgative, but also as a fungicide, rat poison and an insecticide. The mercury in it can cause serious physical problems in humans, such as damage to brain function, reproductive problems, including miscarriage, and nervous function disruption, especially when used

frequently to treat common illnesses, as it often was [in the 19th century]. <http://www.lenntech.com/periodic/elements/hg.htm>

[6] Daniel Rogers Williams (1811-1899), husband of Frances Mary “Fanny” Walker Williams, younger sister of Sarah Davis. They lived in Stockbridge MA,



[7] William Perrin Walker (1778-1858), father of Sarah Davis.



[8] Lucy Adam Walker (1781-1864), mother of Sarah Davis

[9] Mary Hutchinson Parmalee [Mrs. William] Walker (1760-1838), 2nd wife of William Walker (1751-1831); stepmother of William Perrin Walker. She was Sarah Davis’ paternal grandmother.



[10] William Walker (1751-1831), great-grandfather of George Perrin Davis; paternal grandfather of Sarah Davis; father of William Perrin Walker.

[11] The eight living Walker children were: Lucy Forbes (b. 1808), William (b. 1810), George (b. 1812), Sarah Woodruff (b. 1814), Frances Mary “Fanny” (b. 1817), John Adam (b. 1821), Cornelia “Nell” (b. 1823), and Richard Henry (b. 1826). A ninth child, Charles (b. 1819), died in infancy in 1820.

**Key for the correspondent initials used in letter citations:*

***ALC** – Aaron Lucius Chapin, son of Laertes Chapin (see endnote #1 above)*

***DD**–DavidDavis*

***DRW** – Daniel Rogers Williams, husband of Frances M. “Fanny” Walker Williams*

***GPD** – George Perrin Davis, 12 year old son of David & Sarah W. Davis, who was attending Mr. Hyde’s School for Boys, in Lee, MA*

***JR** – Julius Rockwell, husband of Lucy Forbes Walker Rockwell, eldest sister of Sarah Davis. The Rockwell family lived in Pittsfield MA but in 1850, Rockwell was a member of the US House of Representatives from Massachusetts 7th district*

***LC** – Laertes Chapin, father of Aaron Lucius (aka A.L.) Chapin, 1st president of Beloit College, Beloit WI; family friend of the Davis family. See endnote #2 above.*

WPW – *William Perrin Walker, father of Sarah W. Davis. See endnote #7 above.*

**Key for the archive initials used in letter citations:*

AL or ALPL – *Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, Springfield IL*
College, Beloit WI

BC – *Beloit*