

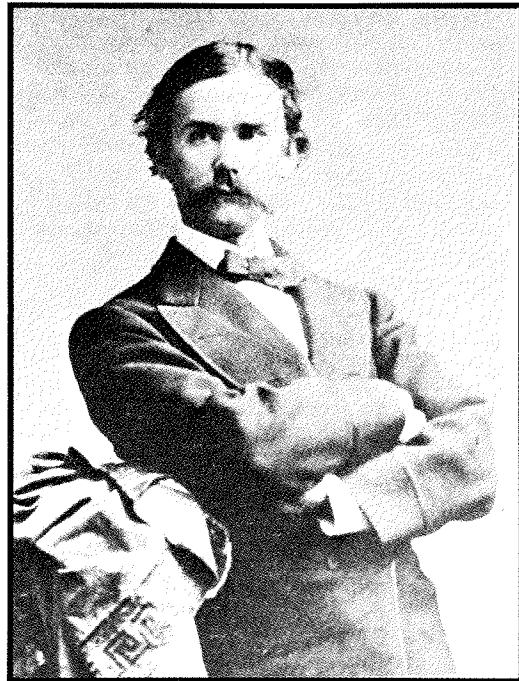
A Texan Witnesses the First Thanksgiving: Adventures in War-Time Washington

By James Marten

Thomas H. DuVal traveled from Austin, Texas, to Washington, D.C., in the fall of 1863. A federal judge, DuVal had not resigned when Texas left the Union and joined the Confederacy in 1861, and he intended to collect over two years of back pay. After a sometimes harrowing and often tedious six-week journey, DuVal arrived in Washington on November 14, and spent nearly three weeks “dancing attendance in the anti-chambers of the great”¹ trying to accomplish his mission. He eventually succeeded, but not until he met with Abraham Lincoln, William H. Seward, and other government officials, toured the capitol, attended a “miserable play” at Ford’s Theater,² and observed the first national Thanksgiving Day in the nation’s capital. Few Southerners, new holiday, in the knew or cared about the Yankees’ new holiday. Although DuVal was actually less-than-impressed with the celebration, he may have relished, deep in his Unionist heart, sharing in a new national institution of his beloved Union.³

DuVal had a broader agenda in Washington than merely claiming his long-overdue salary. He hoped to convince the President—and anyone else who would listen to him—that the best way to win the hearts and minds of Union men in Texas was to allow them to emancipate their slaves gradually. DuVal himself owned at least one slave and employed others, and never mentions the morality of slavery in his diary. Nevertheless, he seems to have accepted fairly early in the war that slavery would not survive the conflict. As the following excerpt from his diary indicates, he was disappointed in this attempt to play a role in the redemption for the Union of his home state.

Following his sojourn in Washington, DuVal journeyed to New Orleans and then to Brownsville to join the Union forces temporarily occupying parts of the Rio Grande Valley. When they gave up their invasion of Texas, he returned with them to New Orleans, where he was united with his family. He re-



Col. John Hay

mained in the Crescent City for the rest of the war. In his own words:

November 25, 1863. At 11 Ocl’k this morning, called to see Mr. Smith, 1st Aud. Treas.⁴ He sayd my a/c as Judge was before 1st Comptroller, and we walked around to that Depart. Found they knew nothing about it, and I am to call again (Friday morning) and see about it, when I suppose all will be ready. Tomorrow is Thanksgiving day, and the public offices will be closed. From Treas’y Dep’t went to the President’s and sent a card in to him by his private Sec’y, Col. Hay⁵—The Col returned saying the Presid’t was not in, and it was uncertain when he would be—offering at the same time, to submit my card to the President, as soon as he came in, and telling me to call again. So I went off, with a “flea in my ear.” Much as I hate “dancing attendance on the offices of the great” I must go back to the President’s this evening at 4 Ocl’k, and see if my card has reached him. After leav-

EDITOR’S NOTE: Dr. Marten is a member of the faculty, Department of History, at Marquette University. Our readers will recall his article “Dancing Attendance in the Anti-chambers of the Great,” published in the fall issue, 1988.

ing President's house, called on Mr. Holt⁶ and told him what had occurred—Said that my daily reports to him must be a bore. He replied most kindly, offering to go to Sec'y of Treas'y⁷ and expedite my business, but as I could not get away before Saturday or Sunday next, I told him this was unnecessary. At 3 1/2 P.M. walked to the President's and waited there until Col. Hay came. He said he had given my card to the President, who stated that he was too unwell to see anybody at present. Hay told me to call again on Friday morning. Nothing has annoyed me so much as Washington, as this difficulty of seeing officers and having business attended to.

Tomorrow is Thanksgiving day, so no business can be done till the day after. I am getting restive as a chained bear. To day wrote Genl. A.J. Hamilton, directing my letter to New Orleans or Brownsville Tex⁸

In my interview with Mr. Seward⁹ yesterday, I told him I had read his short speech at Gettysburg with pleasure¹⁰—that there was one sentiment in it, which his Sec'y Mr. Webster,¹¹ thought would bring down on him the abuse of the rabid abolitionists—the radicals of that order—as they seem to be called here. He asked what it was—I told him it was what he said about the erring Southerners. His expression of pity over them falling at Gettysburg, and the kindly welcome which he would give the people of the South, as returning prodigal sons when they came back to them loyally &c &c. He answered like a philosopher, Said he was used to their abuse and did not mind it—That he had no doubt the proslavery men were as honest as he was—that it was a mere difference of opinion, as to the institution—That his own wish had always been that the people among whom it existed, would themselves, eradicate it—That this war would necessarily cause its extinction &c. He said he was abused by the radicals, because he was not an abolitionist, as they understood the term, and by the pro slavery men, because he was. God only can look into the heart, but I sincerely believe that Mr. Seward is an honest man, in his political opinions. He is certainly a philosopher & Statesman of the first order. I told him I thought his sentiments uttered at Gettysburg, were those of a Christian gentleman, and a man of liberal and enlarged views, those of a true patriot. What creatures we are of prejudice and passion! Mr. Seward has for many years been held up in the South as her greatest enemy—as a great but bad man—the arch fiend of abolitionism—a second Lucifer. And the South has believed it!!¹²

November 26, 1863. Under the proclamation of the President this is Thanksgiving day.¹³ The public offices are all closed and Washington is in a joyous mood, for as if to hallow it this day, news came this morning of Grant's successes over Bragg at Chattanooga.¹⁴ I don't know how much of religious spirit there may be in this Thanksgiving occasion here, but there is certainly a larger amount of *ardent spirit* connected with it. I have seen more drunken men to day about the Kirkwood,¹⁵ than I have at any one place for a long time. So far as I could see it was not occasioned by the good news from Chattanooga, tho the jovial crowd was mostly composed of army officers. I think they were in for a frolic on *general principles*. Having a miserable cold, I have remained in the hotel all day, neither going to Church or to any of the numerous places of public amusement. To night I have managed to get a coal fire (a dull, sombre affair) in my room, and am now writing by it. The day has been bright and beautiful—the sky without a cloud. To night it is quite cool, and I suppose there will be frost. Tomorrow, I am to make another effort to see the President, and to get

my business at the Treasury dep't settled. My anxiety to get away from here and start back to Texas is very great. My poor little wife & children are continually in my thoughts.¹⁶ The news from Texas makes me more anxious than I should otherwise be. Next to Laura, my most unhappy thoughts are about my poor boy Burr.¹⁷ He is in a position that he feels to be wrong, and one from which I would give all I ever expect to have to get him out of. What makes the matter so distressing to me is, that he was mainly induced to take the side he has, because he thought it would shield me from harm, and enable him to aid the family. It has done this, and it makes my heart bleed to think of him. Still, he is not without blame, I tried to induce him to resign and go to Mexico, or come off with me. This he would not do, tho he was satisfied the chances of success for the rebellion was very slight. A false sense of honor kept him from doing what his own conscience told him was right. May God take care of him, and sway him on the side of his country, before it is too late. He is but a boy—His convictions are right, but he needs the resolution to stand by them. I pray God to give it to him.

* * * * *

November 29, 1863. This morning it was dark, damp & cold. About 11 Ocl'k I walked three quarters of a mile to Mrs. Taylor's boarding house near the Capitol, to see Richd. F. Birchett.¹⁸ Stayed with him near two hours, being introduced to several gentlemen, whose names now I don't remember, and who seemed to look upon me as a short of show. Feeling quite unwell, having a miserable cold (a malady, by the way that has stuck to me ever since I left Shreveport [Louisiana]) I came back to the Hotel and remained housed all the day. After dark Mr. Mahon¹⁹ called in to see me. He gave me more insight into political



Joseph Holt

workings here, than I had before. He is a warm friend of McClellan²⁰—is an old line democrat—but believes now that for the restoration of the Union, slavery must & ought to be ended—either suddenly or gradually. He thinks the latter would be best, and seems to feel an interest in behalf of my application to the President—about which I told him in confidence.

Tomorrow I am going to make another effort to see the President. I feel very miserable tonight about all at home, especially my dear little wife.

* * * * *

December 2, 1863. Made another effort to see the President this morning. Was told by Nicolay²¹ he could not see me—was still unwell &c.—in fact that he was certain he could not see me this week.²² I felt desperate and went to Mr. Holt. At my request, he called to see Mr. Seward, and afterwards informed me that Mr. Seward said I had better not wait any longer. Mr. Holt gave me to understand, that what I and my friends wanted the President to do, would be substantially embraced in his message to Congress, which will be sent in next Tuesday. This Mr. H. said he was not authorized to state—did not have it *ex cathedra*—but such was his own belief. From all this I infer that Mr. Seward told Mr. Holt as much, so I feel satisfied—Mr. H. said the President thought it best not to give any special authority as to Texas, as there would be a general basis laid down in the message for all the States. So we must depend upon the message itself.²³

Mr. Holt proposed we should go to Sec'y of War,²⁴ and get a passport for myself back to Texas, and order for transportation in any public boat &c. So we went over there, but Sec'y of War was closeted with some body

and we could not see him. Mr. H. and myself after standing in wait sometime left, and he told me to call at his office at 2 1/2 P.M. and that in the mean time he would endeavor to see the Sec'y. So I told him good morning, and went to the Capitol to see the Statue of Freedom (19 feet high) placed on the top of the Rotunda, 287 feet from the ground.²⁵ There was a large crowd there, and I again met Mr. Holt there, who introduced me to Judge Wayne.²⁶ I had a good deal of talk with the Judge. He said the negroes carried into Texas, since the war begun, ought to be held as free men,²⁷ but he was in favor of the Southern States providing for the emancipation of their own negroes (such as they had before Lincoln[s] Proclamation) and coming back into the Union by their [sic] own action. He said we ought to form a State out of Western Texas &c.²⁸

At the hour set, I called on Mr. Holt, and he gave me passport from Sec'y of War, to go either from N. York to Orleans, or to same place by way of Ohio & Miss. river. I then told Mr. Holt good by, and made cordial acknowledgments for his kindness to me. He told me to give his kindest regards to Aunt Polly & my sisters²⁹ & to write to him. I requested Mr. Holt to write to me at New Orleans, as soon as he had read the message, and let me know, for myself & my Union friends, what he conceived was the safest and best plan for us to pursue, so as to meet the views of the President. therein expected. He said he thought this message would be so plain on the subject to which I had reference, that I could not be misconstrued. However, he promised to write to me in relation to it.

So, I conclude to leave at 8 o'clock in the morning for Baltimore.

NOTES

¹November 21, 1863, Thomas H. DuVal diary, Barker Texas History Center, University of Texas at Austin. I would like to thank the Barker Center for permission to edit and publish this extract from DuVal's diary.

²November 20, 1863, DuVal diary.

³For DuVal's meeting with Lincoln, his tour of the capitol, and other experiences, see "Dancing attendance in the antichambers of the great: A Texas Unionist Goes to Washington, 1863," *Lincoln Herald* (Fall 1988).

⁴Thomas L. Smith became 1st auditor of the United States Treasury in 1862.

⁵John M. Hay (1838-1905), a pre-war legal colleague of Abraham Lincoln, was the President's personal secretary and biographer.

⁶Joseph Holt (1807-1894), Lincoln's Judge Advocate General. Like DuVal, he was born in Kentucky and attended St. Joseph's College in Bardstown.

⁷Salmon Portland Chase (1808-1873), an Ohio abolitionist, governor, United States Senator, and Secretary of the Treasury from 1861 to 1864.

⁸Andrew Jackson Hamilton (1815-1875), a former United States Congressman from Texas and an ardent Unionist, had fled the Lone Star State in 1862. After he completed a speaking tour through the midwest and northeast, Abraham Lincoln appointed him brigadier general of volunteers and military governor of Texas. By late in 1863, he was back in Texas, accompanying the Federal expedition that had entered Texas at the mouth of the Rio Grande on November 3, 1863. Union troops occupied parts of the lower Rio Grande Valley, including Brownsville, until July 1864. Walter Prescott Webb, ed., *Handbook of Texas*, V. 2 (Austin: Texas State Historical Association, 1952), 475.

⁹William H. Seward (1801-1872), former governor of New York and Secretary of State from 1861 to 1869.

¹⁰Accompanying the President to Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, for the dedication of the soldiers' cemetery, Seward made a short, generous speech to a group of serenaders from the band of the Fifth New York Artillery on the evening of November 18, the day before the dedication ceremony. Allan Nevins, *The War for the Union: The Organized War, 1863-1864* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971), 440.

¹¹Erastus D. Webster, the Secretary of State's personal secretary.

¹²Many Southerners had in part blamed Seward, an opponent of slavery and originator of the "higher law" doctrine, for John Brown's futile raid on Harpers Ferry in 1859. Sen. James Chesnut of South Carolina asserted that Seward's free labor views had inspired "much of the violence we have seen in the country." A Richmond newspaper offered \$50,000 for Seward's head and some Southern fire-eaters suggested kidnapping the New Yorker and hanging him without a trial. Glyndon G. Van Deusen, *William Henry Seward* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), 214-215.

¹³Colonists in America had frequently carried on European traditions by holding harvest festivals and days of Thanksgiving. During the Revolutionary War, national days of thanks were held, but it was not until 1863 that an annual Thanksgiving Day entered the calendar. Sarah Josepha Hale, editor of *Godey's Lady's Book*, had begun a campaign for such a holiday in 1827; her last editorial on the subject appeared in September 1863, two months after the great, emotional Union victory over the Confederates at Gettysburg. Abraham Lincoln responded to the national relief and to Hale's editorial by proclaiming that the last Thursday of November 1863, would be a "day of thanksgiving and praise to our beneficent Father who dwelleth in the heavens." Secretary of State Seward played a large role in the adoption of the holiday; his biographer asserts that he actually wrote the President's proclamation. Van Deusen, *William Henry Seward* 401-402. Ever since 1863, Thanksgiving Day has been celebrated annually, with a few exceptions, on the fourth Thursday in November. Jane M. Hatch, comp., *The American Book of Days, 3rd Ed.* (New York: H.W. Wilson, 1978), 1054-1057.

¹⁴In a series of battles fought between November 23-25, Gen. Ulysses S. Grant, aided by Generals W.T. Sherman, Joe Hooker, and George Thomas, broke the Confederate siege of Chattanooga, Tennessee. Gen. Braxton Bragg commanded the defeated Confederate army. Patricia L. Faust, ed., *Historical Times Illustrated Encyclopedia of the Civil War* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986), 133.

¹⁵The Kirkwood House, at Pennsylvania Avenue and 12th, was not as famous or as popular as Williard's, but was definitely among the best of Washington's hotels. Vice President Andrew Johnson stayed at the Kirkwood and took his oath of office there after Lincoln's assassination. Margaret Leech, *Reveille in Washington, 1860-1865*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1941), 10, 493.

¹⁶DuVal's wife Laura, his three daughters (Florence, Nannie, and Mary), and his infant son Johnnie remained in Austin.

¹⁷DuVal's son Burr had joined the Confederate army in an attempt to deflect criticism away from his Unionist father. He served primarily in Arkansas on the staff of his uncle,

Confederate General William Steele.

¹⁸Unfortunately, despite a thorough search of the appropriate biographical sources, Birchett remains unidentified.

¹⁹D.W. Mahon, who was acting 1st auditor of the Treasury in 1861, was succeeded by T.L. Smith in 1862, whereupon Mahon became Smith's chief clerk.

²⁰George B. McClellan (1826-1885) the West Point-educated commander of the Army of the Potomac from the summer of 1861 to the fall of 1862. McClellan won the Democratic nomination for President in 1864.

²¹John George Nicolay (1832-1901), a Bavarian-born orphan and journalist. In 1861 he became the president's personal secretary.

²²Lincoln's illness prevented him from seeing anyone between November 27 and December 3, 1863. Earl Schenk Miers, *Lincoln Day By Day: A Chronology, 1809-1865, V. 2* (Washington: Lincoln Sesquicentennial Commission, 1960), 223-224.

²³Lincoln's December 8, 1863, Proclamation of Amnesty and Reconstruction left little room for the gradual emancipation of slaves. When DuVal read the proclamation on his way to New Orleans, he wrote in his diary that "I fear it will not help the hope I had for Movement in Texas as much as I wanted." Roy P. Basler, ed., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln, V. 8* (Springfield: Abraham Lincoln Association, 1955), 53-56; December 12, 1863, DuVal Diary.

²⁴Edwin M. Stanton (1814-1869), a Democratic lawyer and, briefly, attorney general under President James Buchanan, he served as Secretary of War from early 1862 until May 1868.

²⁵President Lincoln insisted that work continue on the unfinished capitol building during the war, to provide confidence and inspiration to the Northern populace. The statue of "Armed Freedom" was placed on top of the Capitol dome to the accompaniment of a thirty-five-gun salute (one for each state) and with thousands of spectators. Leech, *Reveille in Washington*, 345.

²⁶Supreme Court Associate Justice James Moore Wayne (c. 1790-1867), a Georgian who had been on the Supreme Bench since 1835. When the war began, he remained with the Union despite his strong Southern ties.

²⁷Thousands of slaves were brought to Texas from Louisiana, Arkansas, and Mississippi by masters seeking refuge from invading Yankees. Robert L. Kerby, *Kirby Smith's Confederacy: The Trans-Mississippi South, 1863-1865*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972), 255.

²⁸Forming a state out of West Texas—including strongly Unionist Austin and San Antonio—was a dream of many Texans who remained loyal to the United States. During Reconstruction, Radical Republicans went so far as to write a Constitution for the "State of West Texas," but nothing came of their efforts. Ernest Wallace, *The Howling of the Coyotes: Reconstruction Efforts to Divide Texas* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1979).

²⁹Polly Hynes, DuVal's aunt on his mother's side, lived with the DuVals in Texas after her lover died fighting in the Texas Revolution. Four of DuVal's sisters lived in Texas: Marcia Paschal, Elizabeth Paschal, Mary Hopkins (all three of whom lived near Austin), and Florida Howard.