

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

A *Bon-Temps* Thanksgiving

In the United States, the traditional Thanksgiving holiday model traces its origins to a 1621 celebration at the Plymouth colony in present-day Massachusetts. Most Americans know something of the history of that “first” Thanksgiving feast where fifty Pilgrims and ninety Wampanoag Indians feasted for three days. They were so thankful for the harvest and also just to be alive, considering half of them had starved to death in the first year. A Patuxet Indian named Squanto helped the colonists survive that first harsh winter in the New World by teaching them the native method of growing maize and how to catch the fish necessary for food and for fertilizing the maize crops.

Celebrating days of Thanksgiving continued from time to time by colonial leaders (such as Governor Bradford), but the practice of holding an annual harvest festival like this did not become a regular event in New England until the late Seventeenth Century. The first Thanksgiving Proclamation was issued on June 20, 1676 by the governing council of Charlestown, Massachusetts. This time, the council set aside June 29 as a “day of Solemn Thanksgiving and praise to God” for a series of ongoing victories against “the Heathen Natives”. Not quite the comingling of the 1621 feast.

President George Washington, on October 3, 1789 issued the first National Thanksgiving Day Proclamation from New York City. Setting aside November 26, he mentioned “our duty as a people” and our “great obligations to Almighty God” for the many “blessings we experience”.

Other presidents followed with their own proclamations, including Abraham Lincoln who set aside the last Thursday of November as a day of “Thanksgiving and Praise”. This was in 1863 in response to a letter from Sarah Josepha Buell Hale (1788 - 1879), an American writer and influential editor of *Godey's Lady's Book*. Besides tirelessly campaigning for the creation of the American holiday known as Thanksgiving (“Would it not be a renewed pledge of love and loyalty to the Constitution?”) and for the completion of the Bunker Hill

Monument (actually on Breed's Hill), she is also the author of the nursery rhyme "Mary Had a Little Lamb". In 1941, under FDR's presidency, Congress made the third Thursday of November an official national holiday.

Most Americans are unaware that an earlier Thanksgiving observance was held just two years before Plymouth and codified in the founding charter of Berkeley Hundred in Charles City County, Virginia, in 1619. That day of Thanksgiving took place on the banks of the James River at what is now Berkeley Plantation, the birthplace of Benjamin Harrison, signer of the Declaration of Independence and father of the ninth President of the United States, William Henry Harrison. Charles City County, as of 2010, had a population of merely 7,256, but it is the birthplace of two American presidents. John Tyler is the second.

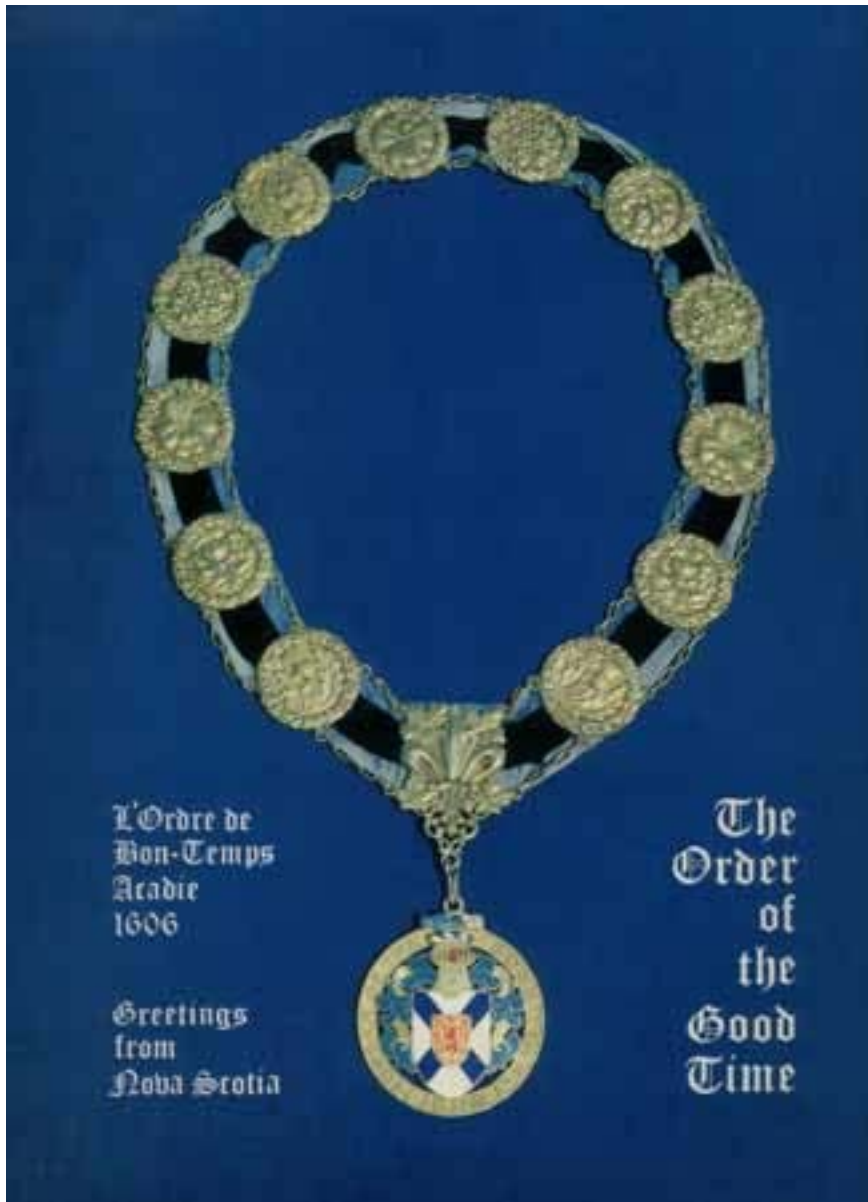
The County of Charles Cittie (sic) was named for Prince Charles, later to become King Charles I of England. The majority of the European colonists who arrived there came as indentured servants and owed labor time, usually up to seven years, to wealthier sponsors who had paid for their passage to gain land and laborers. Still, there was much to be thankful for.

There is now evidence for a truly "first" Thanksgiving celebration on the continent by Spanish explorers in Saint Augustine, Florida, back in 1565. Michael V. Gannon, the Distinguished Service Professor Emeritus of History at the University of Florida, was the first to lay out this premise in his scholarly work *The Cross in the Sand* back in 1965, but few picked up on it. An AP reporter proclaimed Gannon's academic findings to the world in 1985, which earned him the sobriquet, "The Grinch who stole Thanksgiving". Here's the Florida story:

Pedro Menéndez de Avilés (1519 –1574) was the Spanish admiral and explorer who founded St. Augustine in *La Florida*, first sighting land on August 28, 1565. On September 8, Menéndez and his men celebrated Catholic Mass and a feast of Thanksgiving with the Timucua Indians fifty-six years before the Pilgrims. Spaniards and the Timucua alike dined on oysters, clams and bean soup. Sounds like something they would've enjoyed back in Massachusetts.

But for those in New Orleans and South Louisiana, who love to "pass a good time," there is a Thanksgiving with a Canadian connection. Not the very "first" Thanksgiving service in Canada in 1578, which goes back to the explorer, Martin Frobisher, seeking a northern passage to the Pacific Ocean, but the Thanksgiving feasts held in November 1606 that were established at Port-Royal, Acadia, New France, by Samuel de Champlain (1567 –1635). Founded as the first social club in North America, *L'Ordre de Bon-Temps* (Order of the Good Time, or Good Cheer) was organized not just to celebrate successful harvests, but

also to partake of good food and to enjoy entertainment.



At the time it was believed that the disease known as scurvy (then called "land sickness") was caused by idleness, so the first meeting of this gourmet French Colonial Order, which took place on November 14, 1606, included a theatrical performance called "*Le Theatre de Neptune en la Nouvelle-France*". The play told the tale of mariners travelling to the New World, only to encounter Neptune, god of the sea along the way.

In 1603, Henry IV, King of France and Navarre, granted Pierre du Gua, Sieur de Monts the exclusive right to colonize lands in North America between 40°– 60° North latitude, along with a monopoly in the fur trade in these territories. He also named him Lieutenant General for

Acadia and New France. The next year, du Gua organized an expedition and left France with seventy-four settlers including Royal cartographer Samuel Champlain, the Baron de Poutrincourt, priest Nicolas Aubry, Louis Hébert and Mathieu de Costa (a multilingual black man, the first registered to have set foot in North America). Champlain, also a superb navigator, chronicler, draughtsman, soldier, explorer, diplomat and geographer, would become known as "The Father of New France". He founded the first permanent European settlement north of Florida (Port-Royal in 1605) and Québec City on July 3, 1608.

Champlain chronicles here his *Bon-Temps* Order, where the feasting occurred weekly and continued throughout the winter until the end of March only to resume each year in the Autumn:

"We spent this winter very joyously and of good times, due to the *L'Ordre de Bon-Temps* that I established here, which each person finds useful for their health and more beneficial than any sort of medicine that we could have used. The Order was presented as a Chain of office that we placed with some small ceremony, at the neck of one of our people, charging him that day with going hunting; the next day we gave it to another and thus consequently: all who wished to try would do their best and bring the most beautiful hunt: We don't find it half bad, as well as the Indians who were with us".

As Marc Lescarbot explained, "each of whom in his turn, became steward and caterer of the day." The person in charge of the evening's feast would enter the main room of the Habitation wearing around his neck the collar of the Order (see photo above) that he would tend to the future host of the next evening. Once the meal commenced, the guests would tell stories and sing.

Although suggested by Champlain, the Order was chartered under the Royal auspices of Jean de Biencourt de Poutrincourt *et de Saint-Just* (1557–1615), Baron de Poutrincourt, and Pierre du Gua. The practices of the Order were established by first Chief Steward Marc Lescarbot, who wrote that all ate well at Port Royal: "stone-ground whole wheat bread, sturgeon, lobster, crabmeat, mussels, vegetables including corn, squash, beans and cabbage. Of all their meats none is so tender as moose and none so delicate as beaver tail."

At the first gathering of the Order, there were less than seventy men at Port Royal, according to Lescarbot, joined by Indians, who participated in the welcoming home of Baron Poutrincourt. However, only fifteen men of birth were recognized as founding the Order, and allowed to sit at the main table. The founding fifteen *Chevaliers* of the Order, known as the *Nevoux Noblise* of New France, were those who normally dined at Baron Poutrincourt's table. They included

Champlain, Lescarbot, Louis Hébert, Charles de Biencourt, Claude de La Tour, Charles de La Tour, surgeon Daniel Hay, Champdoré, and probably Francois Gragé, dit Du Pont (aka Pontgragé). Lescarbot wrote, "These feasts were often attended by Indians of all ages and both sexes, sometimes twenty or thirty being present. The Sagamore, or chief, Membertou, the greatest Sagamore of the land, and other chiefs, when there, were treated as guests and equals."

What is significant about this unusually gourmet *Bon-Temps* Order, is that it included men, such as Louis Hébert (Poutrincourt's cousin-in-law), from whom some modern day Louisiana residents are descended. After all, South Louisiana became home to many French colonists (Cajuns) deported by the English from Acadia in the Great Expulsion of 1755-1763. And New Orleans was a town founded by Canadians. Most Louis Hébert descendants, however, are to be found in Canada.

Considered to be the first European to farm in Canada and the first Canadian apothecary, Louis Hébert and his wife Marie Rollet had only one son, Guillaume, (as well as two daughters Guillaumette and Anne). Guillaume and his wife in turn had a daughter, Francoise (who married a Fournier, thus ending the surname Hébert with her line), and a single son, Joseph Hébert, who in turn had a single son, Joseph Hébert, who died young thus ending the surname Hébert with his line. However, some of the descendants of Louis Hébert do carry the name Hébert through marriage of female descendants with other men named Hébert through the years.

From The Works of Samuel Champlain, edited by H. P. Biggar (1922):

"To brighten the atmosphere and foster the esprit de corps amongst the sieur de Poutrincourt, lord of Port-Royal's staff members, Samuel de Champlain had the idea to create 'the order of Good-Cheer' during the winter 1606-1607. In turn, the members of the small elite of Port-Royal were to prepare a gastronomical meal for their fellow-members, with the fruit of their hunting and fishing in the rich Acadian natural environment plentiful with game and fish of various kinds."

Speaking of "first" Thanksgivings, we can't forget Texas with a claim dating back to the spring of 1598, when Juan de Oñate led more than 400 people almost 400 miles across the Chihuahuan Desert to claim the northern Rio Grande Valley for Spain. They ran out of food and water, so when they finally reached the river, there was much for which to be thankful. After ten days recuperating in the shade of the cottonwood trees along the river, on April 30, 1598, Oñate ordered a day of thanksgiving that featured a Catholic Mass and a great meal, with duck, geese and fish.

Every year, on the fourth Saturday in April, people in San Elizario, the

small town outside El Paso where Oñate's feast took place, mark the occasion with a re-enactment and speakers. Governor Ann Richards stirred things up a few years ago when she signed a proclamation declaring Texas as the home of the first true Thanksgiving, which sparked a good-natured throw-down between Massachusetts and Texas. Dressed as *Conquistadors*, members of the El Paso Mission Trail Association journeyed to Plymouth, Massachusetts, in November 1992 to debate a group dressed as Pilgrims over who was first. The Plymouth County sheriff "fake arrested" the Texans on charges of "blasphemy and spreading false rumors" and held a mock trial. The following year, some Massachusetts "Pilgrims" traveled to El Paso and San Elizario, where they too were "fake arrested", charged with spying, thrown in jail and threatened with hanging. All good clean fun and publicity.

On May 11, 2001, the Speaker of the House in Nova Scotia, Canada, reaffirmed official recognition of *l'Ordre de Bon-Temps in Canada* as grant of the Province under the custodianship of the Nova Scotia Ministry of Heritage. From *Conquistadors* to *Chevaliers*, Thanksgiving means different things to different people.

As we approach another Thanksgiving holiday, we once again have the opportunity to enjoy our families and give thanks for our many blessings. This year was a difficult year for so many Americans who are out of work or have suffered economic hardship, but hopefully the upcoming year will be one where all can proclaim "*Laissez le bon-temps roulez!*" (Let the good times roll!) At least we don't have scurvy.

"Temporary lay offs. - Good Times. Easy credit rip offs. - Good Times. Ain't we lucky we got 'em - Good Times."

NED HÉMARD

New Orleans Nostalgia
"A *Bon-Temps* Thanksgiving"
Ned Hémar
Copyright 2011