

Re-Thinking Thanksgiving The Complete Story of an American Holiday

The “First Thanksgiving” ...or was it?

By Perry Ground

Much of what people 'know' about Thanksgiving is actually a blend of fiction, myth and history that has become widely accepted as truth. But the events of what we call “the First Thanksgiving” are nothing like our traditions today. And the creation of this holiday has little to do with the feast that took place in 1621 between the “Pilgrims and the Indians.”

So what really happened at Plymouth in 1621? Unfortunately, we don't know all the answers. In fact, many people would be surprised to discover that we actually know very little about what took place at “the First Thanksgiving.” The only written account of what happened comes from one paragraph of one letter written by one of the participants, Edward Winslow. In his effort to describe the bounty of “the New World,” Winslow describes a celebration shared with the local Native peoples, the Wampanoag, which coincided with the harvest. It is this celebration that has become acknowledged as the beginning of the Thanksgiving tradition in America. Using Winslow's letter, let's examine what we really know about “The First Thanksgiving” and compare it to some of today's popular traditions.

How long did the feast last? According to Winslow's letter, “many of the Indians coming amongst us ...whom for three days we entertained and feasted...”, this celebration was either being prepared for, or underway when the Wampanoag came to them and became part of this event. While today's celebration is only one day, the original feast lasted for three.

Who was there? Although 102 people had come to Plymouth on the Mayflower, the first winter was devastating and nearly half died of sickness or starvation. Only 53 of the original settlers survived to partake in the celebration. For the Wampanoag, we know from Winslow's letter that “many of the Indians coming amongst us, and among the rest

their greatest King Massasoit [sic], with some ninety men...” So the leader of the Wampanoag people attended this feast but who the other ninety men (or women?) were is lost to history.



Historically authentic reenactment photo courtesy of Plimoth Plantation, www.plimoth.org

Did the feast take place in November? Probably not but we don't know for sure. We do know that it took place sometime between two other documented events - September 22 when men returned to the village and November 9 when a ship arrived from England. Crops are harvested in the Plymouth area by late September or early October which would lead us to believe that it happened around that time. The late November date of today's Thanksgiving comes much later in history.

Did they eat turkey at the “First Thanksgiving”? Most people are shocked to learn that almost nothing we eat today at a “traditional” Thanksgiving meal was available in 1621 at Plymouth. The only foods that Winslow specifically mentions in his letter are Corne (meaning wheat), Indian Corne (probably a white corn), Barly [sic] and Peas but he is referring to the harvest more when describing them. He does state “our Governour sent foure men on fowling...; they foure in one day killed as much fowle...served the Company almost a weeke...” But were these “fowle” turkeys? We don't know. Many of the writings from that time make a distinction between fowl (meaning water birds) and turkey. Governor Bradford writes about the harvest in a different journal “And besides water fowl, there was great store of Wild Turkeys.” Other birds in the area that the Pilgrims ate included duck, geese, swan, crane, and eagles so Winslow's reference could mean any of these. The only food we definitely know the Pilgrims and Wampanoag ate during the feast was venison because Winslow tells us so, “...and they went out and killed five Deere, which they brought to the Plantation...” So, unless your Thanksgiving table has venison and fowl, you are not eating the same things as the people at the “First Thanksgiving.”

Why did they even have this celebration? Again, we don't know for sure but Winslow writes that the Governour sent the men fowling (hunting) “so we might after a more special manner reioyce (rejoice) together, after we had gather the fruit of our labors;” this indicates that the celebration was a harvest festival similar to Harvest Home which was a common practice in England. Also, these 53 people were survivors of a very difficult year – in a new land, many of their friends and family had died, unsure of their relationship with the Native peoples – and now had a good harvest that seemed to ensure enough to eat through the winter. And as a group of religious people, they wanted to give thanks to God for providing them with such bounty. So why did the Wampanoag participate? As with many Native peoples, the Wampanoag had a cycle of religious ceremonies to give thanks to the Creator for all the things in the world around them, including the harvest. Activities such as feasting and game playing were regular parts of these celebrations just as there were prayers and songs. Sharing foods and “recreations,” as Winslow calls them, would have seemed a normal part of giving thanks to the Wampanoag.

But was it the “First Thanksgiving?” This is a difficult question to answer because there is nothing in Winslow's letter that calls this event a thanksgiving. At the time, a day of thanksgiving was a solemn day of prayer and pioussness and perhaps fasting. To the Wampanoag, this was not one of their traditional religious ceremonies of thanksgiving. So to the people present in 1621, this three day celebration would not have been called a thanksgiving. And what about it being the first? The Wampanoag and many other Native peoples had been giving thanks for the Creator's gifts for thousands of years before the arrival of any English settlers. The English tradition of Harvest Home was well established when the Pilgrims arrived. And Spanish explorers and other English colonists had celebrated religious observances of thanksgiving in Florida, Texas and Virginia many years before the Pilgrims and Wampanoag shared their feast. So in reality it was neither the “First” nor a “Thanksgiving.” But for the creation of the American holiday, many people look to this event as the founding of Thanksgiving traditions.

As we gather this November to share this American tradition of Thanksgiving, many people will recall the harvest feast that was shared by two very different cultures nearly 400 years ago. We should pause to reflect on the peaceful coexistence and spirit of cooperation and thankfulness that those two peoples shared at Plymouth. And while our traditions and tables today may look nothing like those from long ago, we must remember that iconic event and understand that it has helped shape the character of America.

Next installment: Thanksgiving becomes a Holiday...in December?

The series was written by Perry Ground. Ground is a Turtle clan member of the Onondaga Nation, part of the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) Confederacy. He is a traditional storyteller and cultural educator; currently, Perry is the Project Coordinator of the Native American Resource Center in the Rochester City School District. The first in a 3-part series created by the New York News Publishers Association Newspaper In Education Program. All rights reserved, 2011.

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Thanksgiving becomes a Holiday...in December?

By Perry Ground

Much of what we think we know about the “First Thanksgiving” is actually myth and legend created over the years since 1621. So how did this harvest celebration (not a thanksgiving) attended by less than 150 people become the holiday celebrated by millions of Americans today? And where did all the traditions that we practice today – the turkey, cranberry sauce, and the day after shopping – come from? Again we start with some primary source documents to find the answers.

The annual tradition of Thanksgiving didn't really start at Plymouth with the feast of 1621. In fact, that feast was a one time event. The next (and really the first) Thanksgiving celebrated by the Pilgrims occurred two years later in 1623 and celebrated the end of a long drought. Governor William Bradford noted this was a day of prayer and pious humiliation. The Wampanoag were not invited to participate as they had been two years before. The next proclamation of Thanksgiving in New England occurred in the summer of 1676 and was proclaimed to celebrate the end of King Philip's War. This war was a fight to control Native lands that nearly exterminated all Native peoples of New England. So, the tradition of being thankful changed very rapidly from the original harvest celebration shared by the Pilgrims and the Wampanoag.

How did Thanksgiving become a holiday celebrated across the country? There were many factors that played a role in the creation of this celebration and the traditions surrounding it. The first mention of a “Thanksgiving-like” event was published in the very first newspaper ever printed in New England. Called “Publick Occurrences both Forreign and Domestick” [sic], this paper is published in Boston on September 25th, 1690 and the first story reads, “The Christianized Indians in some parts of Plimouth, have newly appointed a day of Thanksgiving to God for his Mercy in supplying their extreme and pinching Necessities under their late want of corn...Their Example may be worth Mentioning.” The idea of Native peoples near Plymouth celebrating a Thanksgiving was now in print.



Portrait of Sarah Josepha Hale
by James Reid Lambdin ca.1831
Source: Richard's Free Library, Newport,
New Hampshire

The first time Thanksgiving was celebrated as the United States was very early in the country's history. In 1777, little more than a year after declaring independence, the Continental Congress issued a proclamation that set aside December 18th of that year as a day of Public Thanksgiving. It was to commemorate the victory of the American army at Saratoga. The first President to proclaim a national holiday of Thanksgiving is George Washington. His proclamation of 1789 set aside the last Thursday in November as a day of Thanksgiving “to be observed by acknowledging with grateful hearts the many and signal favors of Almighty God.” But a few years later, Washington makes another Thanksgiving proclamation only this time he sets the date as February 19th, 1795 and he does so to recognize the growth of this new country. So Americans are celebrating Thanksgiving but for reasons very different than a bountiful harvest. These and other early celebrations of Thanksgiving were all intended to be religious in nature.

After Washington, not all Presidents proclaimed Thanksgiving and eventually the recognition of this event was left to state governors. But starting in 1827, one woman took on the task of getting Thanksgiving proclaimed as a national holiday. She was Sarah Josepha Hale. She published a book entitled “Northwood” which included the first introduction of Thanksgiving as a holiday. Later, Sarah was the editor of an influential woman's magazine called Goodey's Lady's Book. Beginning in 1837, she used the editorials to extol the virtues of a Thanksgiving holiday. She never mentioned anything about “Pilgrims and Indians.” In 1847, Sarah wrote in one such editorial, “The Governor of New Hampshire has appointed Thursday, November 25th, as the day of annual thanksgiving in that state. We hope every governor in the twenty-nine states will appoint the same day -- 25th of November -- as the day of thanksgiving! Then the whole land would rejoice at once.” Hale also began a letter writing campaign to each President to encourage him to proclaim a national Thanksgiving holiday. Her work paid off in 1863 when Abraham Lincoln issued his Thanksgiving proclamation. Sarah continued her efforts and each President after Lincoln called for a National Day of Thanksgiving, usually on the last day of November as Sarah had requested. For this work, the Pilgrim Hall Museum has dubbed Sarah Josepha Hale as the “Godmother of Thanksgiving.”

The book, “Chronicles of the Pilgrim Fathers” by Reverend Alexander Young, published in 1841 also helped shape Thanksgiving. In the book, Young described the re-discovery of the letter written by Edward Winslow that detailed the harvest celebration in 1621. Young declared that “this was the First Thanksgiving, the harvest festival of New England.” He also stated that “on this occasion they no doubt feasted on the wild turkey as well as venison” which contributed to the idea that turkey was a traditional Thanksgiving meal. At the same time, Sarah Hale was publishing articles and poems in her Lady's Book that told people how to host a traditional New England Thanksgiving and turkey was always served as part of the meal.

Like today, Thanksgiving was seen as the start of the “holiday season” and many people began their Christmas shopping on the day after Thanksgiving (beginning the tradition of Black Friday). As the date for Thanksgiving was still determined by the President, during the Depression, retailers lobbied Franklin Delano Roosevelt to move Thanksgiving earlier to allow more time for shopping. But in 1939 and 1940, when he proclaimed Thanksgiving to be the last Thursday of the month, there was a national outrage and many states refused to follow the President's proclamation. The country became divided over when to celebrate this most American of traditions. So in 1941, Congress passed a law declaring that Thanksgiving would always be held on the fourth Thursday of November establishing Thanksgiving as a legal holiday. Because of the fluctuations in the calendar, sometimes Thanksgiving is the last Thursday of the month but 2 out of every 7 years, the holiday falls on the second-to-last Thursday of November. Ever wonder why Thanksgiving seemed ‘early’ some years? It's because of President Roosevelt and his attempt to make a longer shopping season!

The Thanksgiving holiday that is celebrated today has gone through many changes. What has remained constant is the coming together of family and friends to appreciate life's blessings and the connection that we have with those around us. To some this day holds religious or spiritual meaning, to others a nostalgic wish for long ago, for some it is a time to focus on family, food and fun, and still more see it as simply a day off of work or school – a day to relax. But no matter the thoughts behind the occasion, Thanksgiving remains a very American tradition and one that is shared by millions of people of different races, religions, beliefs and backgrounds. It is one event that binds Americans together in part of our national identity. For that, we can all be thankful.

Next installment: Do Native Americans celebrate Thanksgiving?
A Native American Perspective on an American Holiday

The series was written by Perry Ground. Ground is a Turtle clan member of the Onondaga Nation, part of the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) Confederacy. He is a traditional storyteller and cultural educator; currently, Perry is the Project Coordinator of the Native American Resource Center in the Rochester City School District. The second in a 3-part series created by the New York News Publishers Association Newspaper In Education Program. All rights reserved, 2011.

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Do Native Americans celebrate Thanksgiving?

By Perry Ground

"Do you celebrate Thanksgiving?" Every November, Native Americans all around the country are asked this question and I hear it at least once a day. But what I think people are really asking is "How do Native Americans think/feel about Thanksgiving?" Many people seem to think that Native Americans celebrate this holiday in a different fashion than everyone else around them. But as we learned in the previous articles, this holiday is an American creation based on some facts, some fiction, and lots of myth. Because the traditions surrounding this day are based on myth (and not Native lifeways or practices), many Native peoples (but not all) think of Thanksgiving in the same ways that other Americans think of this holiday.

How did Native Americans come to be associated with this holiday? As we read in Winslow's letter - "many of the Indians coming among us" - we know that the Wampanoag people were present at the iconic feast in 1621. But as an Onondaga person, my tribe had nothing to do with this event. So why would people ask me about Thanksgiving? Unfortunately, many people don't distinguish between the hundreds of different tribes/nations of Native peoples; we are often thought of as all having the same language, culture and identity even though these tribes are scattered across the entire country. Each group is distinct. Each tribe has their own language, government, history and traditions. So



Traditional Thanksgiving Food

when Winslow wrote "many of the Indians" he really should have written "many of the Wampanoag" because that is the tribe the participants were from. If we make that important distinction, then people wouldn't think that all Native Americans (sometimes erroneously called Indians) were present at the "First Thanksgiving."

Many Native communities have maintained their traditional religions which include a cycle of ceremonies throughout the year to give thanks for all the things in the world around them. The concept of being thankful and living in balance with nature can be found in many Native religions; this concept is still practiced in many ways in Native communities around the country. One of the ceremonies in many communities is to give thanks for the harvest of different crops; this continued tradition may lead non-Native people to believe that the Thanksgiving holiday comes from this practice although we learned that it does not.

When people ask me about celebrating Thanksgiving, I believe it is because of the general belief that Native peoples have NOT evolved beyond the ways that we lived hundreds of years ago. Many people think that we still live in long-houses or teepees or wigwams and cavort in the forest wearing deerskin clothing as if we are storybook characters come to life. However, the truth is that Native Americans are 21st century people who have and do all the same things as others around us. We are residents of this country although citizens of our own communities and many Native peoples have traditions, customs, languages, religions and belief systems that have survived until today. These traditional ways of thinking and living are important to many (but not all) Native people. The customs, traditions and beliefs of all the other people around us have influenced our lives as well. So a legal holiday, like Thanksgiving, that is celebrated across the country with parades, dinners and family gatherings can be found in Native American communities as well.

However, not all Native Americans have positive feelings about the Thanksgiving holiday. To some, it is a reminder of the negative relations between European settlers, later Americans and Native peoples. Since 1970, a small group of Native people led by some Wampanoag community members, have declared the day after Thanksgiving to be a National Day of Mourning. This event, held in Plymouth, Massachusetts each year, recognizes these struggles and also an instance where a Wampanoag elder was dis-invited from a Thanksgiving commemoration dinner because his intended remarks focused on the negative effects of those relations. Although the "First Thanksgiving" was a positive, peaceful celebration between the Wampanoag and the English, there were many instances of adverse relationships between Europeans/Americans and Native Americans including the introduction and spread of disease, loss of land, armed conflict, unfair trade and political practices, and forced boarding school education. These events had lasting devastating effects on Native communities. So the celebration of a holiday that many people think comes from Native peoples stirs some of those negative emotions. Acknowledging the validity of these feelings and perspectives is very important in any effort to learn and understand the complete story of Thanksgiving.



Perry Ground with his daughter, Kayleigh Ground

Here in New York, the Haudenosaunee (often called Iroquois) continue to practice their traditional religion. One of the practices still followed is to offer a prayer before all of our religious, political or social gatherings. It is usually called the Thanksgiving Address. In this prayer, we give thanks for all the things in the world around us and show that we are connected to them. We "bring our minds together as one" so that we can be focused on the task at hand but also so that we will live in balance with the world around us. This prayer can be given at any time, not just on a holiday in November. So the concept of being thankful is one that has existed among the Haudenosaunee for hundreds of years prior to the arrival of a group of English settlers at Plymouth.

Thanksgiving means "an act of giving thanks or gratitude" but the word has become so associated with this holiday that it usually brings to mind images of turkey, family, football and a feast in 1621. As we've learned, much of what people believe about this holiday is a blend of fact, fiction and myth but one thing is true – this holiday has become part of the national identity and character. The rest of the world will see that day simply as Thursday but Americans will see it as much more. Whether celebrated with feasting, parades or sports, on this day many people will give thanks for all of life's blessings. And they will continue to pass on to the next generation a series of traditions that have become part of America.

So, do I celebrate Thanksgiving? Yes, I do. On that day in November, my daughter and I will gather with family around a big table and eat turkey, cranberries, mashed potatoes and fresh bread (all purchased at the grocery store). We will watch football, play games, take naps and get ready for the next day's shopping. We will be thankful for all that we have. We will be just like many other people in this country on that day. But on the next day, we will be thankful also, and every day after that. We will not gather for a big feast each day but our traditional way of thinking tells us to always be thankful for all the things in the world around us and to think with the Good Mind. That is our practice every day...not just for one day in November. Perhaps that is an idea that we can all carry away from this holiday – we can be thankful for what we have every day.

Happy Thanksgiving

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Thanksgiving is a national holiday in the United States celebrated in November. The annual feast is in honour of the "first" Thanksgivings in America, in 1619 in Virginia, and in 1621, when colonists in Plymouth, Massachusetts, later known as the Pilgrims, shared a meal with the Wampanoag Indians, who were native to the land. Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade takes place in New York. However, it was not until 1863, during the Civil War, that President Abraham Lincoln declared a national Thanksgiving Day would be held each November to be celebrated by all of the country. When is Thanksgiving? Thanksgiving takes place each year on the fourth Thursday of November. Thanksgiving Day, annual national holiday in the United States and Canada celebrating the harvest and other blessings of the past year. Americans generally believe that their Thanksgiving is modeled on a 1621 harvest feast shared by the European colonists (Pilgrims) of Plymouth and the Wampanoag people. The First Thanksgiving, reproduction of an oil painting by Jean Leon Gerome Ferris, early 20th century. Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. (neg. no. LC-USZC4-4961). Top Questions. What is Thanksgiving? Thanksgiving is an annual national holiday in the United States and Canada celebrating the harvest and other blessings of the past year. How did Thanksgiving start? Thanksgiving is a national holiday celebrated on various dates in the United States, Canada, Grenada, Saint Lucia, and Liberia. It began as a day of giving thanks and sacrifice for the blessing of the harvest and of the preceding year. Similarly named festival holidays occur in Germany and Japan. Thanksgiving is celebrated on the second Monday of October in Canada and on the fourth Thursday of November in the United States and around the same part of the year in other places. Although Thanksgiving has Neither Bradford or Winslow's writing reveal what was actually served at the first Thanksgiving meal, besides fowl and deer, but guesses can be made based on the types of food they often wrote about such as mussels, lobsters, grapes, plums, corn and herbs. There is no actual proof that the colonists ate turkey at the feast either. Turkey wasn't even associated with the Thanksgiving holiday until an editor of a magazine called Godey's Lady's Book came across Edward Winslow's writings about the feast in the 1840s. Up until then, Thanksgiving was only a regional New England holiday and wasn't celebrated across the country like it is today. Hale began publishing recipes and articles about the feast. It grows in bogs, or muddy areas, in Massachusetts and other New England states. Indigenous peoples used cranberries to treat infections. They used the juice to dye their rugs and blankets. They taught the colonists how to cook the berries with sweetener and water to make a sauce. Indigenous peoples called it "ibimi" which means "bitter berry." The ceremony was a public acknowledgment of the Indigenous peoples' role in the first Thanksgiving. It was also a gesture to highlight overlooked historical facts and the widespread neglect of Indigenous peoples' own histories of Thanksgiving for nearly 370 years. Until recently most schoolchildren believed that the Pilgrims cooked the entire Thanksgiving feast, and offered it to the Indigenous peoples present.