

Food for Thought: Native Americans and Thanksgiving



What does Thanksgiving mean to you and how do you celebrate it?

Is it a day to spend time with family and friends? Is it a time to eat lots of delicious food? Is it a time to be thankful for the positive things in your life? As you can see, the same holiday can mean different things to different people. For Native Americans living today, answering the questions above is not so simple. This article explains why Thanksgiving might mean something different to Native Americans, some of whom could be in your class and reading this! The history of Thanksgiving is more surprising than you might think.

When and where was the First Thanksgiving celebrated in the Americas?

Many of you might be familiar with the story of the "First Thanksgiving" that took place in 1621 in what is now Massachusetts. This event really took place, but did you know that it wasn't the first Thanksgiving in North America? Both Native Americans and the English had ways of giving thanks before the Pilgrims arrived in New England. The Algonkian tribes of this region held six thanksgiving festivals each year. What's more, some historians believe that the English held several other feasts of Thanksgiving in the American colonies before the one that we are most familiar with, including one at Jamestown in Virginia. Why do you think we remember the one that took place in Massachusetts?

Who was at the "First Thanksgiving"?

There were English-speaking Pilgrims led by Governor William Bradford and Wampanoag Native Americans led by Massasoit at the Thanksgiving that took place in 1621 in Plymouth Colony (now Massachusetts), at the former site of the Wampanoag village of Patuxet. In addition to the Pilgrims and Massasoit's Wampanoags, a Native American named Tisquantum (Squanto), from Patuxet, was probably at the "First Thanksgiving." Squanto had helped the Pilgrims to survive by teaching them how to properly grow and find food. Squanto also spoke English because he had been captured and spent some time in Europe as a slave, so he acted as a translator between the Pilgrims and other Native Americans.

The Pilgrims held a three-day feast because they were thankful for the fact that they had been able to survive for a year in what was to them a harsh and unfamiliar environment. Documents from the time and Wampanoag oral histories suggest that Massasoit's tribe were not originally invited. Instead, the Wampanoags showed up when they heard celebratory gunfire coming from the Pilgrim's feast. They thought the Pilgrims were in trouble, and came to help them. At this point they were invited and brought deer and other food to add to the feast.

What was the relationship like between the Pilgrims and the Wampanoag?

In 1621, the Pilgrims and the Wampanoag got along well with little fighting. In fact, the Wampanoag leader Massasoit and the Pilgrims had entered into an alliance, which means that they would help each other if one of them was attacked. Unfortunately, relationships between the English and the Native Americans already in New England were not always so positive. For one thing, before 1621, visits by earlier European traders had already devastated many Native American communities by spreading unfamiliar diseases. By the time that the Pilgrims arrived, unprepared for New England winters, many Native American villages were already empty. When the Pilgrims got hungry, they sometimes took from the large amounts of food that these Natives had gathered and stored for winter. Also, since these groups had very different ways of interacting with the land and resources they did not understand each other very well. After 1621, that often led to fighting as more and more English came to live in New England. Less land was available for the Native Americans who were often moved off their former lands.

What happened to the Wampanoag and the Pilgrims?

The English that arrived in New England survived the first few winters and went on to form several colonies, many of which, such as Massachusetts and Connecticut, became part of the United States.

The Pilgrims originally had their own colony called Plymouth Bay, but over time it became part of Massachusetts. Today, there are people living all over the United States who are related to the people that arrived on The Mayflower and other early English ships, but they do not wear the same kinds of clothing or live the same way that their English ancestors did 400 years ago! While they faced many challenges and major changes, there are still Wampanoag and other Native Americans living throughout the United States. In fact, there are more than 500 Native American tribes in the United States! Most of the time, Native Americans living today do not wear the same clothing that was worn long ago, either, and they also do not live the same way that their ancestors did.

When and why did Thanksgiving become a national holiday?

Thanksgiving was not always a national holiday, although communities throughout the country likely gave thanks many times throughout history for many different reasons. In 1863, President Abraham Lincoln called for a national day of Thanksgiving in order to boost the country's morale during the Civil War. It was not until 1941, though, that President Franklin Roosevelt set the fourth Thursday in November as the day that the United States would celebrate Thanksgiving every year.

Do Native Americans living today celebrate Thanksgiving?

The answer to this question depends on which Native American you ask. Some Native Americans might celebrate Thanksgiving by getting together with family, eating a lot of turkey, and watching football. Other Native Americans might have a family gathering with lots of food, but for them it's a time of sadness. Still others might use the day to raise awareness about the history of Native Americans in the United States. Many Native Americans today would agree, though, that being thankful is not something that you do once a year, but something that you do throughout the year.

ACTIVITY

What Foods Were Eaten at the "First Thanksgiving?"

Circle the foods that you think they ate at the "First Thanksgiving." Once you find out the answers, how does that compare to the food on your Thanksgiving table?

Fresh berries	Turkey	Deer	Pumpkin Pie
Cranberry Sauce	Mashed Potatoes	Cornbread	Squash
Fish	Pumpkin Soup	Beans	Stuffing
Duck	Gravy	Corn	Rolls

Correct answers:
Turkey, deer, fresh berries, corn bread, squash, pumpkin soup, and beans, duck, corn.



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