

# The Real Story of the First Thanksgiving

from ancestors of the Wampanoag Tribe  
and English colonists who were there



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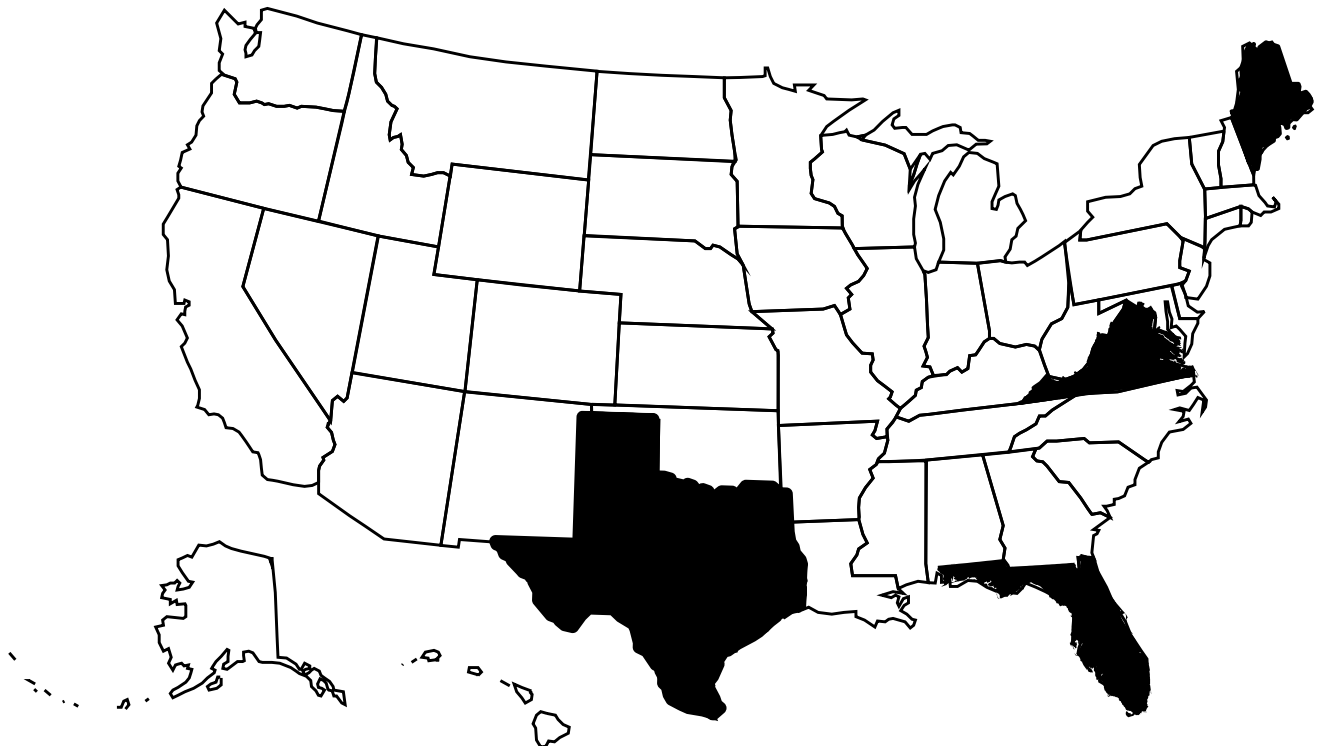
# The Real Story of the First Thanksgiving

We think we know what happened at that first Thanksgiving, why it was held, how the Wampanoag were invited, what the English ate. It is easier to believe this tale than to look at the facts. In reality, the English story was invented and the holiday proclaimed for political reasons.

Did you know that Florida, Maine, Texas, and Virginia have each claimed site of the first Thanksgiving? Or that Spanish explorers and some English colonists celebrated religious services of thanks years before the Mayflower arrived? Few people knew about these events until the 20th century. So, it is the three-day event in Plymouth in the fall of 1621 that marks the “familiar” birth of the Thanksgiving holiday in America.

When you hear about the English and the Wampanoag sharing the first Thanksgiving meal in 1621, the Wampanoag are the ancestors of the Wampanoag Nation. As the story goes, the English sailed from England on the Mayflower, landed at Plymouth Rock, and had a good harvest in 1621. So, the governor (William Bradford) held a feast to celebrate and invited a group of friendly Native Americans, including the Wampanoag chief Massasoit, and they feasted for three days on fowl and deer. But “not exactly,” says Ramona Peters, the Tribal Historic Preservation Officer for the Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe.

Read on to get the real story of the first Thanksgiving, as shared by descendants of the Wampanoag Tribe and descendants of the English in Plymouth Colony.



# Why the English really came to America

The English came to the West looking for religious freedom and advantage, having encountered persecution and hardship in their old world. "They knew they were English and looked not much on those things" they left behind. Only 53 of the English survived the Mayflower voyage, arriving on November 9, 1620.

Contrary to what most of us learned in school, the English did not even land at Plymouth Rock. The first recorded history of the rock was in 1715; the first reference to the English landing on a rock was in 1741. A rock traditionally referred to as "Plymouth Rock" was once memorialized on the shore of Plymouth Harbor in Plymouth, Massachusetts. The English intended to land south of the Hudson River, somewhere in New Jersey, but with headwinds, a potential storm, and the sight of land, the captain put ashore off Cape Cod harbor.



Nor did the English arrive to find an empty land, any more than Columbus discovered America. After their arrival on Cape Cod, before they even made it to Plymouth, one of the very first things the English did, some say, was "rob Wampanoag graves and steal as much of the Indian corn and beans as they could carry."

Historical passages in the book, *Chronicles of the English Fathers*, show the English came here seeking religious freedom and wanting to proselytize their faith - but that wasn't all they wanted. They came here seeking better advantage and wanting to shed the hardship they had known as exiles from their own land. Necessity their taskmaster, they hoped for a better life and apparently had nowhere else to go. (Read excerpts from the book at the end of this story.)

## Why the Thanksgiving holiday was started

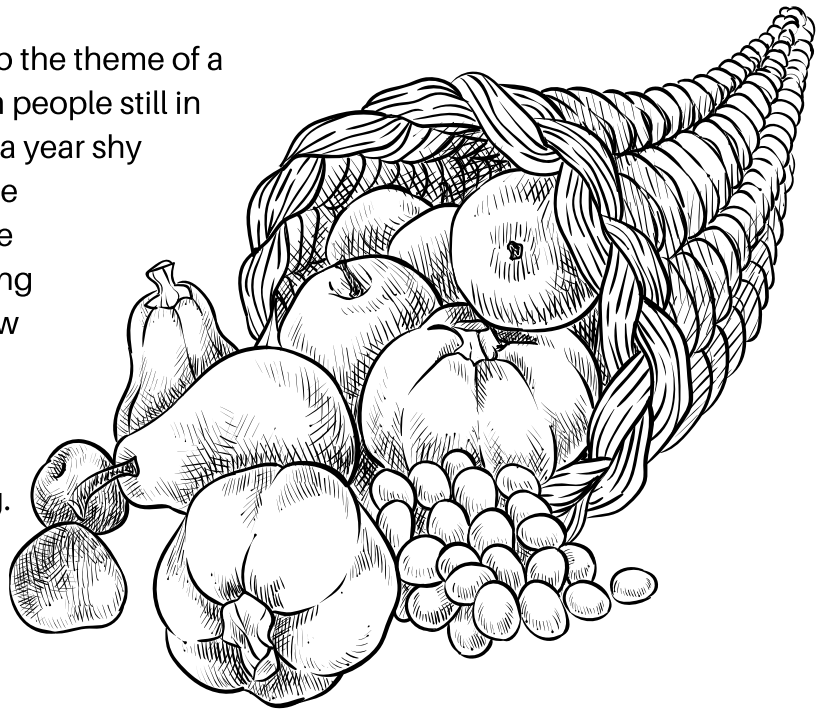
A day of thanks did take place in Plymouth Colony in 1621, but it was quite different than the tale we all know. Other days of thanks in Massachusetts are documented as well. For instance, governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony (John Winthrop) in 1623 declared a celebration and day of thanks upon the safe return of the men who had gone to fight against the Pequot in Mystic, Connecticut. This fighting led to the enslavement and massacre of more than 700 Pequot men, women, and children from the New England-based tribe, a precursor to what would be centuries of strife for Native peoples in America.

Centuries later, in 1970, Wampanoag leader Wamsutta Frank James had hoped to speak about this overlooked aspect of history when he was invited to speak at a banquet celebrating the 350th anniversary of the landing of the pilgrims. But, after reading a draft of his talking points, the event organizers decided to cancel his appearance. This prompted the Wampanoag leader to start the National Day of Mourning that began in 1970 and occurs annually on Thanksgiving Day. It honors the death of Native Americans at the hands of early settlers and colonists and shines a light on realities facing Native Americans today.

The first proclamation of the first American “thanksgiving” was November 1, 1777, when the 13 colonies joined together over victory of the British at Saratoga.

In 1863, Abraham Lincoln made up the theme of a national Thanksgiving Day to calm people still in strife over the Civil War. It was just a year shy of the 38 Dakota Sioux hangings he approved. While intended to evoke unity, this first national Thanksgiving had nothing to do with the tale now so familiar.

These are only a few of the facts surrounding the first Thanksgiving. Read on and prepare to be surprised by the rest of the story.



## Native American accounts of the First Thanksgiving

The truth of the tale behind the first Thanksgiving is best understood through the lens of history shared by Mashpee Wampanoag tribal members and historians. Here we quote and paraphrase what they shared with mainstream media.

*Account by Paula Peters, a Wampanoag tribal member and expert on their history, via Huffington Post:*

People have become very comfortable with the story of the pilgrims and the Indians, overlooking history and even how Squanto could speak English at his first encounter with the pilgrims. In 1614, six years before the pilgrims reached Massachusetts, an Englishman kidnapped Squanto (aka Tisquantum) from his Patuxent village (part of the Wampanoag Confederation). He took Squanto and about two dozen others to Spain to sell them into slavery. Squantum escaped this fate, possibly with the help of Catholic friars, then found his way to England where he learned English. In 1619, he made it back to America, only to discover he was the only survivor of his village - an epidemic had swept across New England in his absence.



<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Squanto#/media/File:Squantoteaching.png>

*Account by Ramona Peters, via Indian Country Today Media Network:*

After Squanto's aid with corn and other planting, the pilgrims had a successful harvest and celebrated with a day of giving thanks. They were shooting guns and canons in celebration, which alerted [the Wampanoag]. They didn't know why the pilgrims were shooting, so Massasoit gathered up some 90 warriors and showed up at Plymouth prepared to engage, if needed. "They didn't know. It was a fact-finding mission." Upon arrival, a translator explained they were celebrating the harvest, so the Wampanoag decided to stay to ensure this was true. By then the Wampanoag had seen other landings — Captain John Smith, even the Vikings — so they camped nearby for a few days. During those few days, their men went out to hunt and gather food—deer, ducks, geese, and fish. There were 90 men camped there, and at the time "only 23 survivors of that boat, the Mayflower, so you can imagine the fear."

When asked whether the pilgrims invited the Indians to sit down to a turkey meal, Ramona said, "Ah, no. Well, let's put it this way. People did eat together [but not in what is portrayed as 'the first Thanksgiving.']. It was our homeland and our territory and we walked through their villages all the time. The differences in how they behaved, how they ate, how they prepared things was a lot for both cultures to work together... In those days, the English really needed to rely on us and, yes, they were polite as best they could be, but they regarded us as savages nonetheless."



The First Thanksgiving at Plymouth, 1914, by Jennie A. Brownscombe. Image from Wikipedia

# 17th Century Accounts of the First Thanksgiving

Three books from the 1600s speak to the fall events in 1621 Plymouth, authenticated as based on 17th century accounts by those who were there. (Actual excerpts from these books are provided at the end of this story, in 17th century spelling.)

## *Mourt's Relation:*

Written by Edward Winslow between November 1620 and November 1621, according to a member of the General Society of Mayflower Descendants, Mourt's Relation was first published in London in 1622 and is largely behind why the pilgrims and the Wampanoag became associated with the first Thanksgiving. The book describes in detail what happened from the landing of the pilgrims at Cape Cod, though their exploring and eventual settling at New Plymouth, to their relations with the Indians, up to the first Thanksgiving and the arrival of the ship Fortune soon after. The book tells us the people of Plymouth Colony gathered to rejoice after the harvest, that Massasoit arrived with 90 men, they feasted together for three days and fired firearms, and the tribe gave the colonists five deer. It does not tell us the Indians were invited, that their friendship was being celebrated or that the colonists were pilgrims.

## *Of Plymouth Plantation:*

Written by William Bradford (governor of Plymouth Colony), Of Plymouth Plantation tells us the people of Plymouth gathered after their harvest and began to prepare their dwellings for the coming winter. It shows they had abundant provisions, including fish (cod, bass) in the summer, and venison, turkey and waterfowl in the winter. It does not tell us anything about the presence of a tribe at the gathering, only that the pilgrims were at the time friendly with the neighboring tribes but deemed them without religion and apparently discounted their spiritual beliefs.

## *Chronicals of the Pilgrim Fathers:*

Written by the pilgrims who planted Plymouth Colony, and authenticated as taking precedence over everything else related to the pilgrims, Chronicles of the Pilgrim Fathers covers their origin in the 1602 congregation of Pastor John Robinson to his death in 1625. It tells us numerous food sources were naturally available, including walnuts, chestnuts, plums, gooseberries, strawberries, roots and herbs, as well as turkey, quail, pigeon, partridge, water fowl, beaver, otters, fish and Indian corn – in other words, a bounty. The book also shows there was a focus on means and what was there for the taking, citing a letter written by William Hilton, a passenger who arrived on December 11, 1621, on the Fortune ship. It also reveals their tribal neighbors were regarded as “heathens who would be easily swayed to believe the pilgrims were sent there to save them.”

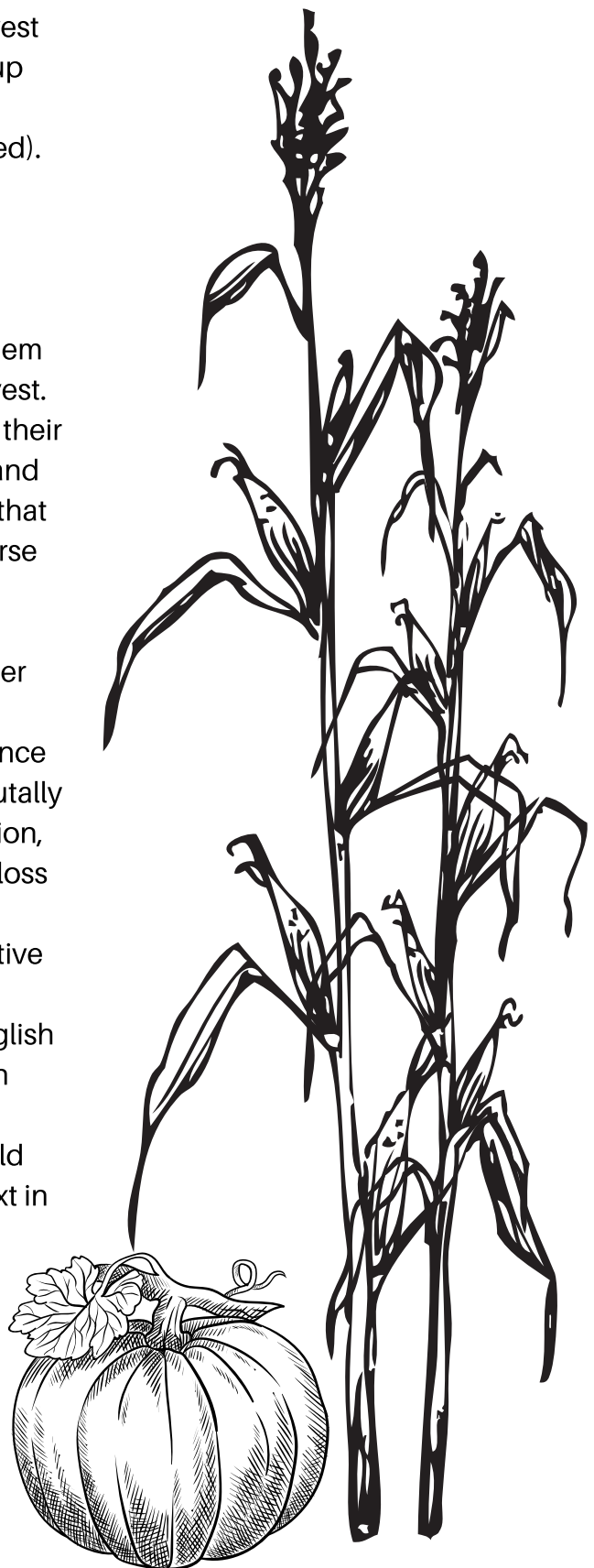
## The only true parts of the Thanksgiving tale

The English celebrated their first successful harvest with a day of thanks. The Wampanoag showed up (out of concern over gunshots, rather than invitation). Fowl was eaten (turkey is unmentioned). All the rest of the familiar tale is fiction.

The English looked upon Squanto as a “friendly Indian.” He became an emissary between the English and the Wampanoag in 1621, helping them plant their corn to reach that first successful harvest. It is true the Europeans would not have survived their first year at Plymouth Colony, if not for Squanto and the aid of the Wampanoag, and it has been said that the capture of Squanto forever changed the course of history on this continent.

The rest of the story untold is what happened after the first Thanksgiving — how that first harvest marked the beginning of the end of English reliance on their tribal neighbors, and the relationship brutally changed. In return for their charity and compassion, the Wampanoag and other tribes got genocide, loss of land, and centuries of oppression. Some say Thanksgiving is celebrated at the expense of Native peoples, and while America celebrates a day of thanks with feasts and football, based on the English tale, many Native Americans continue to live with disparities and economic hardships. You can’t change history, but knowing the real history could change you. Be sure to learn what happened next in part two, “After the First Thanksgiving.”

[www.nativepartnership.org/afterthanksgiving](http://www.nativepartnership.org/afterthanksgiving)



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Show that you care. [Support the work](#) being done by PWNA and other Native-led and Native-serving nonprofits. It is critically important, yet less than one percent of all charitable giving in the U.S. supports Native causes.



Share this information with a friend who needs to know the real story of Thanksgiving.



Download The Truth About Thanksgiving - a Thanksgiving lesson plan to help teach children the truth about Thanksgiving from a Native American perspective. Share it with a teacher, a school, or review the contents with your own children or grandchildren. [www.nativepartnership.org/lessonplan](http://www.nativepartnership.org/lessonplan)



## Excerpts from the 17th Century Books (in olde English)

*Mourt's Relations, on the first Thanksgiving:*

"...our harvest being gotten in, our governour sent foure men on fowling, that so we might after a speciall manner rejoyce together, after we had gathered the fruits of our labours; they foure in one day killed as much fowle, as with a little helpe beside, served the Company almost a weeke, at which time amongst ther Recreations, we exercised our Armes, many of the Indians coming amongst us, and amongst the rest their greatest king Massasoit, with some ninetie men, whom for three dayes we entertained and feasted, and they went out and killed five Deere, which they brought to the Plantation and bestowed on our Governour, and upon the Captaine and others. And although it be not always so plentifull, as it was at this time with us, yet by the goodness of God, we are so farre from want, that we often wish you partakers of our plentie."

*Of Plymouth Plantation, on the first Thanksgiving:*

"They begane now to gather in ye small harvest they had, and to fitte up their houses and dwellings against winter, being all well recovered in health & strenght, and had all things in good plenty; for as some were thus imployed in affairs abroad, others were excersised in fishing, aboute codd, & bass, & other fish, of which yey tooke good store, of which every family had their portion. All ye somer ther was no want. And now begane to come in store of foule, as winter approached, of which this place did abound when they came first (but afterward decreased by degrees). And besids water foule, ther was great store of wild Turkie, of which they tooke many, besids venison, &c. Besids, they had about a peck a meale a weeke to a person, or now since harvest, Indean corn to yt proportion. Which made many afterwards write so largely of their plenty hear to their freinds in England, which were not fained, but true reports."

"We have found the Indians very faithful in their covenant of peace with us; very loving and ready to pleasure us; we often go to them, and they come to us; some of us have been fifty miles by land in the country with them... yea, it has pleased God so to possess the Indians with a fear of us, and love unto us, that not only the greatest king amongst them, called Massasoit, but also all the princes and peoples round about us, have either made suit unto us, or been glad of any occasion to make peace with us, so that seven of them at once have sent their messengers to us to that end. Yea, an Isle at sea, which we never saw, hath also, together with the former, yielded willingly to be under the protection, and subjects to our sovereign lord King James, so that there is now great peace amongst the Indians themselves, which was not formerly, neither would have been but for us; and we for our parts walk as peaceably and safely in the wood as in the highways in England. We entertain them familiarly in our houses, and they as friendly bestowing their venison on us. They are a people without any religion or knowledge of God, yet very trusty, quick of apprehension, ripe-witted, just. The men and women go naked, only a skin about their middles."

*Chronicles of the Pilgrim Fathers, just after the first Thanksgiving:*

"At our arrival in New Plymouth, in New England, we found all our friends and planters in good health, though they were left sick and weak, with very small means; the Indians round about us peaceable and friendly; the country very pleasant and temperate, yielding naturally, of itself, great store of fruits, as vines of divers sorts in great abundance. There is likewise walnuts, chestnuts, small nuts and plums, with much variety of flowers, roots and herbs, no less pleasant than wholesome and profitable. No place hath more gooseberries and strawberries, nor better. Timber of all sorts you have in England doth cover the land, that affords beasts of divers sorts, and great flocks of turkey, quails, pigeons and partridges; many great lakes abounding with fish, fowl, beavers, and otters. The sea affords us great plenty of all excellent sorts of sea-fish, as the rivers and isles doth variety of wild fowl of most useful sorts. Mines we find, to our thinking; but neither the goodness nor quality we know. Better grain cannot be than the Indian corn, if we will plant it upon as good ground as a man need desire. We are all freeholders; the rent-day doth not trouble us; and all those good blessings we have, of which and what we list in their seasons for taking...

These poor heathens since we came hither, will easily think that God hath some great work to do towards them. They were wont to be the most cruel and treacherous people in all these parts, even like lions; but to us they have been like lambs, so kind, so submissive, and trusty, as a man may truly say, many Christians are not so kind nor sincere."

*Chronicles of the Pilgrim Fathers, on why the pilgrims came:*

"...alas, they admitted of bondage, with danger of conscience, rather than to endure these hardships [of liberty in Holland and the shores of England]. It was thought that if a better and easier place of living could be had, it would draw many and take away these discouragements; yea, their pastor would often say that many of those that both writ and preached now against them, if they were in a place where they might have liberty, and live comfortably, they would then practise as [the pilgrims] did.

They saw that although the people generally bore all their difficulties very cheerfully and with a resolute courage, being in the best of their strength, yet old age began to come on some of them; and their great and continual labors, with other crosses and sorrows, hastened it before the time; so as it was not only probably thought, but apparently seen, that within a few years more they were in danger to scatter by necessity pressing them, or sink under their burdens, or both; ...and therefore thought it better to dislodge betimes to some place of better advantage and less danger, if any could be found.

As necessity was a taskmaster over them... it produced also many sad and sorrowful effects. For many of their children, that were of best dispositions and gracious inclinations, having learned to bear the yoke in their youth, and willing to bear part of their parents' burden, were oftentimes so oppressed with their heavy labors, that although their minds were free and willing, yet their bodies bowed under the weight of the same, and became decrepit in their early youth... Lastly, (and which was not the least,) a great hope and inward zeal they had of laying some good foundation, or at least to make some way thereunto, for the propagating and advancing the Gospel of the kingdom of Christ in these remote parts of the world; yea, though they should be but as stepping-stones unto others for performing of so great a work."



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