

# Thanksgiving Traditions and History; Of Settlers, Amerindians and Perspective

Ah, Thanksgiving. The time of year where family and friends re-unite to enjoy each other's company, reconnect, and enjoy some delicious home-cooking.

It also means the outbreak of dry, boring, and bland articles on the history of the holiday. Typically these articles cover the same old ground, try to creatively rehash the old material into something "new," and even offer revisionist versions of history in an often, extreme way.

I'm a firm believer that history is incredibly fascinating, compelling and of interest to everyone, not just history nerds, professors or readers. Often, the lack of interest isn't the topic – there's something for everyone – but its delivery. The topic of history has become synonymous with dry, dull and booooooring. Over the years, people have come to only click on history articles for the fantastic vintage photos. But, can history be conveyed in an way that is interesting to just about anyone? To generate enough interest that people will go outside the article's scope to learn more?

Often this leads to a swing in the other direction – one that overcompensates by being edgy, dressing the "same 'ol" using swears and foul language, slang and references to pop culture. It's not that I'm against these things, it's just that adding them to the same exact story is really just ornamentation and changing your shirt and saying that you are a different person. Attach a sensational headline and it is considered "success." It doesn't have to be that way. There are always aspects or angles of the story that differ from the common ones that everyone covers. They just need a little digging and

coaxing.

I'm going to make an attempt to write a balanced article on history, in this case, Thanksgiving. I'm sure you guys will let me know if I failed or where I failed. We're always interested in feedback, so let me have it. With constructive criticism, I'll make the next one better or ditch the idea completely...or fire myself.



### **The First Thanksgiving**

As the story goes, in 1621, the Pilgrims and local Wampanoag Indian tribes celebrated their first successful harvest together. The pilgrims wouldn't have survived without the help of the natives and this was their way of saying "Thanks for giving."

But, guess what? This is only part of the truth. In fact, the coming together of Wampanoags and Pilgrims was incidental, not planned. Some Pilgrims were sent out to hunt for some meat to have on the table for their harvest feast. Their gunshots were heard by the natives in the area and they rushed to tell the leader at that time, Massasoit, that the Pilgrims must have

been preparing for war.

Almost 100 Indians arrived to investigate and were likely ready for a throw-down. However, when they found out what was really going on, they decided to help out – again, just partly true, but more on that later? What brings different cultures together better than sharing a meal?

Since the Wampanoags walked up to two days to get to Plimoth, and weren't originally intending to stay, there was no housing for them, so they had to build their own.

What did the people then call this harvest feast? Well, not necessarily "Thanksgiving." They likely used words like "feast" or "celebration." Boring? We're talking about Pilgrims here!

What was eaten? Our modern table has almost nothing in common with that of the early settlers. They had a number of items that aren't typically found on the modern Thanksgiving dinner table: swan, seal, fish, lobster, clams, mussels, venison, geese, wild turkeys, wild pigeon and duck were the "meats." Say, what? Turkey barely gets a mention? That's bologna? It's true, turkey took a backseat at the first Thanksgiving: the star of the show for the first Thanksgiving was the deer.

How about mashed "potaters"? Cranberry sauce? Nope. The potato hadn't made it to North America from South America yet and cranberry sauce wouldn't be "invented" until 1912. The vegetables eaten at the historic feast were things like corn, squash, onions, and cabbage – there were wild berries and chestnuts as well. Over the course of the week, everyone would eat, nap, play games, sing, dance and then rinse and repeat. Perhaps the idea was to plump up so you had some fat reserves to make it through the Winter? Can you imagine the calories you would consume if you have a three day long version of the Thanksgiving feast? Ugh.



### **Thanksgiving Celebrations Before “Thanksgiving”**

Before? “Come on Joe, you’re pulling my Turkey leg.” No, it’s true! The “thanksgiving” celebration was one a religious ceremony since at least a century before the arrival of the Pilgrims. The word alludes to being a way to describe bringing fasts to an end. When we go to bed, we are technically fasting for 8 hours (yeah, right – who gets 8 hours of sleep these days) and we break the fast, with – well, breakfast. Thanksgiving was like the super, grand version of our breakfast meal.

St. Augustine, Florida – the oldest continuously occupied European-established settlement – actually had a Thanksgiving harvest feast a full half century before the Pilgrims even landed. On September 8, 1565, Spaniards broke bread with the local tribe right after a religious service. Since the Spaniards had just landed and all they had for food was the old, moldy, stale and decrepit food stores- things like salted pork, the hard as a rock Ship’s Biscuit (a bread made to last the Atlantic crossing that you could break a tooth on), garbanzo beans, and of course wine – anything would have been welcome.

The Spaniards were in a rough position. Arriving so late in the year without a chance for a harvest, they had to rely on the local Indian tribes and after the long trip over the "pond" they were eager to have something besides what they had been eating for at least the last two months. So, they made peace in spite of their mal-intentions.

The Spaniards and French would have these harvest festivals off and on over the next few decades.

### **Thanksgiving Celebrations To Follow**

Now, you would think that this harvest feast was so phenomenally amazing that it gave everyone the bright idea to make it an annual event. You'd be wrong. The next one wasn't for another decade. Truth is that between very harsh winters, growing conflict between the settlers and Indian tribes aggravated and threatened by the increasing population, and lack of skill when it came to growing food crops, there wasn't much of an incentive to have another.

From that point on the "Thanksgiving" harvest festival would be sporadically celebrated. Surely, they would have loved to make the harvest festival an annual event. If the harvest was abundant, local tribes and settlers weren't busy fighting one another they'd have one. It's a great idea, right?

It wouldn't be until George Washington's time that the Continental Congress would proclaim Thanksgiving as a festival that should be celebrated once or twice a year that the holiday would gain some momentum towards becoming official. George Washington added a push when he proclaimed a Thanksgiving celebration in December of 1777 for kicking the pants off the British at Saratoga. And that is how Thanksgiving moved from a religious ceremony into a more secular context.

As an official, annual holiday, Thanksgiving wouldn't receive that designation until the last Thursday in November, 1863



when Abraham Lincoln declared it so by proclamation.



### **How The Thanksgiving Table Came To Be**

So, how did we get from clams, lobster, venison, pigeons, etc. to Turkey, stuffing, mashed potatoes, and the other things everyone recognizes? Well, the original feasts came about because you put whatever was available on the table. These early feasts weren't exactly celebrating abundance or variety. You ate anything there was and were grateful for it.

Once America progressed from explorers and settlers to homesteaders, colonies and eventually towns and cities, people had a choice of what they preferred. I'd imagine that people found swan, seal, and even venison gamey tasting. As America became a land of opportunity and immigrants from many cultures, walks of life, and countries began to flock here, they brought and introduced the cuisines to everyone else. This created an astounding variety of choices. Just like pruning a Bonsai tree, people would remove the undesirables and shape the "table" to something most people would prefer

and enjoy.

Being a once per year event, meant that there had to be some “special” centerpiece. The requirements would be that it would have to be large enough to feed many, it would have to be tasty enough to please most, and it would have to be something ubiquitous and easy to harvest or catch. Since there is a lot of history with the celebration, I’d imagine that people wanted something to hearken back to those earliest days. Swan, seal, goose, pigeon, and deer didn’t exactly fill the criteria, but the Turkey sure did!

Of course, today many people have become burnt out on Turkey and it has been replaced in some homes by ham, duck, Turducken and even Chinese food.

### **How Did and How Do Amerindians View the Holiday?**

Having 0% Native American blood (as opposed to the millions who proudly say that they have 1/64th of .01%) I certainly can’t speak for them. Besides, there is a dizzying array of opinions across scores of tribes. Generations later, even more have been added to the table – pardon the pun. Imagine how many differences in opinions you’ll find in the City of New Bedford. I can, however, tell you what I have read on Native American sites and been told by Native Americans.

Many Amerindians look at Thanksgiving as a day of somber remembrance. They see the version of Wampanoags intentionally visiting the Pilgrims to celebrate a great harvest and harmony between the two communities as hogwash. Something that was promoted in Lincoln’s time, even created by the president himself. Some Mashpee have said that the 90 or so natives that showed up, decided to stay, not because they wanted to join in celebrating, but more along the Machiavellian “Keep your friends close, and your enemies closer.” They wanted to keep an eye on these interlopers.



With Wampanoag numbers counted in the low to mid thousands, the skepticism and concern of the early tribes was clearly warranted. While betrayals, harsh dealings, and cruelty came from both sides, it was the settlers who were the ones intruding upon the first people's way of life and taking precious resources. To be fair to the settlers, when you are starving to death, you will fight to survive and with the possibility of returning home at least 3-6 months away, most people would do whatever it took to survive. Of course, when the first generation of settlers were born and grew up they were "native" as far as they were concerned. They were thrust into the destiny of their forebears and not by any volition of their own.

But this doesn't make it any easier for Amerindians to accept what happened to their culture, way of life, and the loss of millions of lives through disease and warring over centuries. They have to go about their daily life with this elephant in the room and constant reminder of their history whenever they interact in society. It's always there underneath every conversation. In fact, in Plymouth today on each Thanksgiving hundreds of native people gather near Plymouth Rock for a



## National Day of Mourning.

Having said that, their outlook seems a balanced, compassionate and spiritual one. I've rarely come across bitterness. They seem to understand that no one alive today was responsible for taking their ancestors land and that the vast majority of people that call themselves Americans would not endorse the horrible things that were done in the past. Besides, hatred and bitterness also colors and affects the individual who has it. Misery does love its company.

And this brings me to my final point and a somewhat ironic one. Their attitude towards all of this shows a gratitude for what they do have. A point of view that demonstrates perspective. It is the native American Indian that is serving as a reminder of what should the core meanings of the holiday are: being grateful for everything you have no matter how little, and coming together regardless of distance, time or differences.

Gratitude, perspective, unification, forgiveness, setting aside differences, eating mouth-watering home-cooked from the heart food? Who could disagree?