

The First Thanksgiving

When you think of Thanksgiving, what comes to mind? Do you think of turkey, stuffing, and pumpkin pie piled high with whipped cream? What about the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade in New York City? Or, do you think of cheering on your favorite football team?

Although families across America celebrate Thanksgiving with their own traditions, it is a holiday that is about much more than food and fun.

So, let's explore how this holiday first came to be and the important role it has since played in our nation's history.

To do that, we'll have to travel back in time, almost 500 years!

Our story begins with the Pilgrims, also known as Separatists, who lived in England.¹

In the 1530s, King Henry VIII created his own church, called the Church of England, because he didn't want to follow the rules of the Catholic Church and the pope. King Henry VIII was a brutal king and made himself the ruler of this new church.²

The Pilgrims refused to support the Church of England and wanted to break away. They thought it was corrupt and didn't like what it was teaching. If a British citizen did not attend the Church of England, they were punished. Those who worshiped separately and in secret—in accordance with their conscience—were persecuted. *[Editor's note: Difference between Pilgrims/Separatists and Puritans: both didn't like the Church of England, but Puritans thought they could reform the Church of England from within, while Pilgrims were more radical and broke off.]*³

Since the Pilgrims weren't allowed to practice their faith freely, they fled England. But before coming to America, they first left England and traveled to the Netherlands in 1608. Although the Pilgrims had the freedom to worship as they pleased, life was hard and they weren't happy. The Pilgrims lived in poverty while working in the textile industry, and parents were concerned their children would not preserve their English language, culture, and heritage.⁴

After more than ten years of living in the Netherlands, some of these Pilgrims decided to move again; however, they were still looking for a place where they could live well and worship freely.⁵ So, in 1620, the Pilgrims boarded the Mayflower in England and set off for the New World. Their voyage would last more than two months and would be very difficult.



The ship had just over 100 men, women, and children, some of whom were searching for religious freedom, while others left in search of economic opportunities.⁶

Aboard the Mayflower, the Pilgrims sat below deck and rarely went outside. The Mayflower encountered a severe storm that blew them off course, which brought them to Plymouth Rock (in present-day Massachusetts).⁷ This first winter was very dangerous. Poor nutrition and disease led to the death of more than half of the original settlers who were aboard the Mayflower.⁹

But the Pilgrims were not alone in their new home.

Before European settlers journeyed to the New World, America was inhabited by many different Native American communities—some of whom had been there for thousands of years.¹⁰

The Iroquois, for example, were composed of five different tribes that made decisions together. The Iroquois lived near present-day New York State. They were skilled builders. Families lived together in longhouses, which were longer than a football field!¹¹ Each longhouse was divided into smaller apartments. They used posts, poles, and bark to construct the longhouses and used bark or rope made from braided bark to tie the framework together.¹² They used fires to keep warm and cook food.

The Wampanoag, or “People of the First Light,” also lived in the Northeast, near where the Pilgrims first landed. In the 1600s, the Wampanoag Nation was thought to have had as many as 40,000 people living across 67 tribal communities.¹³ Their main source of food was corn, but they also hunted and fished.¹⁴

However, as explorers visited the New World, Native American people faced numerous challenges, namely from diseases brought over by Europeans, war between rival tribes, and slavery. Yet it is this backdrop of hardship and struggle faced by both the Native Americans and the new English settlers that makes the story of the first Thanksgiving all the more remarkable.

The first Thanksgiving would not have been possible without a native man named Tisquantum, also known as Squanto. Born into the Pawtuxet people, Squanto was a skilled hunter, fisher, and farmer. His life wasn’t easy—he was seized and taken to Europe, but then he escaped. When he returned home to America, his village had been wiped out by disease.¹⁵

But even though he faced hardship, Squanto overcame these difficulties with his intelligence, strength, and kindness.

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As the Pilgrims struggled to build a community and prepare for another winter, Squanto was brought to them by another Native American named Samoset. Both Squanto and Samoset spoke English, and Squanto was tasked by the Wampanoag tribe to help the Plymouth settlers.

Squanto showed the settlers how to plant crops, such as corn, where the best fishing spots were, and showed them where to hunt beaver. Squanto also was a guide, peacemaker, and interpreter; he introduced the settlers to Massasoit, the Wampanoag chief.¹⁶

Squanto's knowledge of the land greatly contributed to a successful harvest, and his trustworthiness contributed to a period of peace and friendship between the settlers and the natives.

In the fall of 1621, the Pilgrims engaged in a feast to give thanks, which today, we remember as the first Thanksgiving.

The Pilgrims that gathered together to celebrate had a lot to be grateful for. They thanked God for their arrival in the New World and their freedom to worship, and also for their lives. They thanked God for the bountiful harvest and finally, for their new friends, the Native Americans, who joined in the feast.

The Wampanoag brought 5 deer to the feast and joined the Pilgrims in giving thanks. The feast went on for three days and was filled with food, games, and good cheer.

The first Thanksgiving table looked a little different from what it does today. Among the food items on the menu, the Pilgrims and Native Americans enjoyed venison (deer), turkey, corn, and beans. There were other dishes, including artichokes, garlic, concord grapes, walnuts, chestnuts, and pumpkins.¹⁷

The first Thanksgiving was an important event for all in attendance and for our nation's history. Even though it wasn't until 1941 that Congress established Thanksgiving as the last Thursday of November, feasts of giving thanks have taken place in America for hundreds of years.¹⁸

In 1789, America's first president, George Washington, issued a proclamation that called for a national day of thanks. At this time, America had just won independence from England after a long and hard war. Washington set aside a day to thank God for the blessings he had bestowed upon the colonists because he believed that it was God who protected the colonists, helped America win the war, and guided the creation of a new government.¹⁹

In 1863, when Americans were divided and fighting against each other during the Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln issued another proclamation.

President Lincoln realized that even though America was gripped by violence, hatred, and evil, the unity of our country was worth saving. Sharing in gratitude and giving thanks to God is something that brings people with different beliefs, appearances, and ideas together, as was the case with the Pilgrims and Native Americans on the first Thanksgiving.²⁰

So next time you gather around the Thanksgiving table with your family, friends, and loved ones, take a moment to remember the historical significance of this holiday. It is a day that brings us together by setting aside a special time to gather and thank God for all of the blessings that we have as Americans.

Footnotes

1. <https://www.history.com/news/pilgrims-puritans-differences>
2. <https://www.history.com/topics/british-history/church-of-england>
3. <https://www.history.com/news/pilgrims-puritans-differences>
4. <https://www.history.com/news/why-pilgrims-came-to-america-mayflower>
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6. <https://www.mayflower400uk.org/education/mayflower-passengers-list-an-interactive-guide/>
7. https://www.scholastic.com/scholastic_thanksgiving/voyage/journey.htm
8. <https://www.history.com/topics/colonial-america/plymouth>
9. <https://www.gingrich360.com/2021/11/23/newts-world-episode-335-melanie-kirkpatrick-on-thanksgiving-an-american-tradition/>
10. <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/the-first-americans/>
11. <https://www.ushistory.org/us/1d.asp>
12. <https://exhibitions.nysm.nysed.gov/iroquoisvillage/constructiontwo.html>
13. <https://plimoth.org/for-students/homework-help/who-are-the-wampanoag#:~:text=The%20Wampanoag%20are%20one%20of,People%20of%20the%20Firs,t%20Light>
14. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Wampanoag>
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16. <https://www.mayflower400uk.org/education/native-america/2020/june/the-story-of-squanto/>
17. <https://www.gingrich360.com/2021/11/23/newts-world-episode-335-melanie-kirkpatrick-on-thanksgiving-an-american-tradition/>
18. <https://www.archives.gov/legislative/features/thanksgiving>
19. <https://www.mountvernon.org/education/primary-sources-2/article/thanksgiving-proclamation-of-1789/>
20. <https://www.nps.gov/liho/learn/historyculture/lincoln-and-thanksgiving.htm>

Additional Resources

- http://academickids.com/encyclopedia/index.php/Miles_Standish
- <https://kids.britannica.com/kids/article/Mayflower-Compact/601070>
- <https://kids.britannica.com/students/article/Miles-Standish/277205>
- <https://kids.britannica.com/kids/article/Pilgrims/601416>
- <https://kids.britannica.com/kids/article/Plymouth-Colony/353643>
- <https://kids.britannica.com/kids/article/William-Bradford/390657>
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- <https://www.history.com/topics/colonial-america/pilgrims>
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- <https://www.historyforkids.net/william-bradford.html>
- <https://www.historyforkids.net/miles-standish.html>
- <https://historyforkids.org/the-pilgrims/>
- <https://kids.kiddle.co/Squanto>
- [https://kids.kiddle.co/William_Bradford_\(Mayflower_passenger\)](https://kids.kiddle.co/William_Bradford_(Mayflower_passenger))
- <https://kidskonnnect.com/history/mayflower-compact/>
- <https://kidskonnnect.com/people/squanto/>
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- <https://www.ushistory.org/us/3b.asp>