

The First Thanksgiving



Two eyewitness accounts of the first Thanksgiving in 1621, Plymouth Rock (in modern spelling)

From Edward Winslow:

"Our harvest being gotten in, our governor sent four men on fowling, that so we might after a special manner rejoice together, after we had gathered the fruits of our labors; they four in one day killed as much fowl, as with a little help beside, served the Company almost a week, at which time amongst other Receptions, we exercised our Arms, many of the Indians coming amongst us, and amongst the rest their greatest king Massasoit, with some ninety men, whom for three days we entertained and feasted, and they went out and killed five Deer, which they brought to the

Plantation and bestowed on our Governor, and upon the Captain and others. And although it be not always so plentiful, as it was at this time with us, yet by the goodness of God, we are so far from want, that we often wish you partakers of our plenty."

From William Bradford:

"They began now to gather in the small harvest they had, and to fit up their houses and dwellings against winter, being all well recovered in health and strength and had all things in good plenty. For as some were thus employed

in affairs abroad, others were exercised in fishing, about cod and bass and other fish, of which they took good store, of which every family had their portion. All the summer there was no want; and now began to come in store of fowl, as winter approached, of which this place did abound when they came first (but afterward decreased by degrees). And besides waterfowl there was great store of wild turkeys, of which they took many, besides venison, etc. Besides, they had about a peck of meal a week to a person, or now since harvest, Indian corn to that proportion. Which made many afterwards write so largely of their plenty here to their friends in England, which were not feigned but true reports."

The Cause for Celebration

The Pilgrims set ground at Plymouth Rock on December 11, 1620. One third of the original colonists or Pilgrims were made up of members of the Puritan sect of the English Separatist Church. Their first winter was devastating. At the beginning of the following fall, they had lost almost half of the original 102 who sailed on the Mayflower. But the harvest of 1621 was a bountiful one. And the remaining colonists (22 men, 4 married women, and 27 children) decided to celebrate with a feast -- including 91 Indians who had helped the Pilgrims survive their first year. It is believed that the Pilgrims would not have made it through the year without the help of the natives. The feast was more of a traditional English harvest festival than a true "thanksgiving" observance. It lasted three days.

Establishing the Holiday

George Washington proclaimed a National Day of Thanksgiving in 1789, although some were opposed to it. There was discord among the colonies, many feeling the hardships of a few pilgrims did not warrant a national holiday. And later, President Thomas Jefferson opposed the idea of having a day of thanksgiving.

It was Sarah Josepha Hale, a magazine editor, whose efforts eventually led to what we recognize as Thanksgiving. Hale wrote many editorials championing her cause in her Boston

Ladies' Magazine, and later, in Godey's Lady's Book. Finally, after a 40-year campaign of writing editorials and letters to governors and presidents, Hale's obsession became a reality when, in 1863, President Lincoln proclaimed the last Thursday in November as a national day of Thanksgiving.

Thanksgiving was proclaimed by every president after Lincoln. The date was changed a couple of times, most recently by Franklin Roosevelt, who set it up one week to the next-to-last Thursday in order to create a longer Christmas shopping season. Public uproar against this decision caused the president to move Thanksgiving back to its original date two years later. And in 1941, Thanksgiving was finally sanctioned by Congress as a legal holiday, as the fourth Thursday in November.





Common Myths about the "First Thanksgiving"

Myth: The Wampanoag brought popcorn to the first Thanksgiving feast.

Myth: The First Official Thanksgiving took place near Plymouth Rock in 1621.

Myth: The Native Americans the Pilgrims encountered lived in tipis and traveled on horseback..

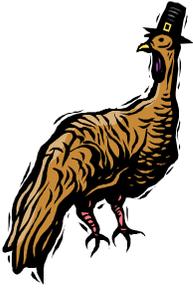
Myth: The Native Americans wore elaborate head dresses with many feathers.

Myth: The Pilgrims shared pumpkin pie, corn on the cob, and sweet potatoes (or yams) with the Wampanoag.

Myth: The harvest feast celebrated by Pilgrims and Wampanoags in the fall of 1621 was the first of its kind in the Americas.

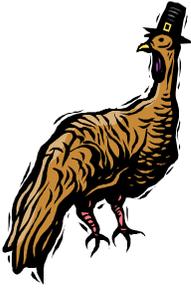
Group Assignment

1. Explain the myth that your group has been assigned, answering these three questions:
 - What is a truth in this myth?
 - What are other truths behind this myth that might contradict it?
 - What does the myth reveal about those who believe it?
2. As a group, you may use any of the materials available to help you understand and explain the myth.
3. Prepare a five-minute presentation to the class that explains your understanding of the myth, using creative drama, visual aids such as posters, music, illustrations, or an oral presentation.



Myth and Truth: The "First Thanksgiving" Presentation Rubric

Category	Excellent	Good	Satisfactory	Needs Improvement
Understanding of Topic	The team clearly understood the topic. They convincingly demonstrated an awareness of the biases in the material that they examined and the relationship between bias and culture.	The team clearly understood the topic. They demonstrated an awareness of the biases in the material that they examined and the relationship between bias and culture.	The team seemed to understand the topic. They were aware of the biases in the material that they examined.	The team did not seem to understand the topic and/or were not aware of the biases in the material they examined.
Presentation Style	The team consistently used gestures, eye contact, voice and enthusiasm in a way that kept the audience interested.	The team usually used gestures, eye contact, voice and enthusiasm to try and keep their audience's attention.	The team sometimes used gestures, eye contact, and appropriate voice to keep their audience's attention.	One or more of the members did not use body language or style to keep the audience's attention. Someone may have been a distraction.
Information	The team presented information that fully and accurately explained the origin and characteristics of the myth. The information was clear and logical.	The team presented information that accurately explained the origin and characteristics of the myth. The information was generally clear and logical.	Most of the information accurately explained the origin and characteristics of the myth. There may have been some mistakes or some things that were not clear.	The information did not accurately explain the origin and characteristics of the myth and/or the information did not make sense.



Myth and Truth: The "First Thanksgiving" Follow-Up Writing Assignment

Critique the pictures on a Thanksgiving children's book cover. Look for traditional, stereotyped Pilgrim and Wampanoag figures as well as images that do not match the "truth" we've learned about the "First Thanksgiving." Write a paper that analyzes the images, noting the myths and underlying truths that are evident in the depiction.

Choose one of the following book covers. Be sure to indicate the title of the book in your paper.

