

THANKS FOR THANKSGIVING

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Historians are universally agreed that the first American Thanksgiving was celebrated long before the event at Plymouth, Massachusetts in 1621 that we commemorate today. There is evidence of Thanksgiving festivals up and down the Atlantic coast, from the Roanoke Colony in Virginia in 1586 to the Popham Colony in Maine in 1607. Notwithstanding, the celebration in Plymouth in 1621 has become the standard legend, and its symbolism, despite the inaccuracy of its details, is an integral part of our culture. Harvest festivals go back to prehistory, but Thanksgiving is not just another harvest festival. It is a festival clearly focused on giving thanks to God for all his blessings, not just for a bountiful harvest. The harvest is the token of Thanksgiving, not its purpose.

A myth is not just a fable or fairy tale. It is a story shrouded in fictional characters or circumstances, told for the purpose of explaining something or conveying a true moral or ethical principle. For generations we have taught our children a myth about the origin of Thanksgiving. It is a myth, but like that of George Washington and the cherry tree, it's OK to pass it along, because it teaches some important values. The story goes something like this. A band of people that we call Pilgrims were persecuted for their religion. They first fled to Holland, and then sought refuge in America by forming a new settlement dedicated to religious freedom. After a dangerous sea journey across the Atlantic headed for the warm Virginia coast, they were betrayed by their persecutors and dumped onto a barren shore in Massachusetts. It was November and too late to plant crops, so about half died that winter from starvation and disease. However, they were befriended by Indians, who taught them how to grow crops in that terrain. The Indians introduced them to a new and nutritious grain called maize, that we call corn. Their first summer prospered, and in thanksgiving to God for his blessings and for the help of the Indians, they prepared a great feast that fall to celebrate the harvest. The Indians brought venison and turkeys, and the settlers prepared game, corn, pumpkins, cranberries and other foods for the feast. Everyone had plenty of good food and fellowship, and every year thereafter the settlers and the Indians got together for a harvest festival that eventually became our celebration of Thanksgiving. This story teaches children the virtues of trust in God, hard work, and mutual support between cultures. Unfortunately, very little of it is true.

The settlers, who are incorrectly called Pilgrims, were English Separatists. They were a sect of Puritans who wanted to separate from the Church of England when they found that they could not purify it of every last vestige of Catholicism. It is true that they were persecuted and that many fled to Holland, but a very few years later they returned to England and rejoined the Separatists there. By 1642 they had launched a civil war, gained power, and executed King Charles I. They themselves became the persecutors of all who did not believe as they did. Some did come to America in 1620, but they were not Pilgrims. Pilgrims are people who make a journey to a religious shrine to worship there. These Separatists never called themselves

Pilgrims—that name was never applied to them until 1843. They called themselves “Saints.” They were not seeking religious freedom, they were seeking their own religious freedom, and had no tolerance for any other religious expressions. They were looking to establish a religious community where only their beliefs would be tolerated, and finding that they could not do so in England or Holland, they sought to do so in the newly colonized Americas. They were refused by the Virginia Company, who were loyal to the King and the Church of England. A group of speculators known as the Merchant Adventurers pooled their money and funded the venture, planning to establish a new colony. If it prospered, it would bring huge profits back to the English investors. They needed farmers and craftsmen. Most of the Separatists were experienced but impoverished farmers and tradesmen who had lost their living because of religious persecution, and welcomed a new opportunity. The agreement was that the colony would not be exclusively Puritan, but Puritans could practice their religion freely, although they were not to force it on others. Since that was the best deal they could get, they agreed. As far as religion went, it was a *laissez-faire* deal of “You leave us alone, and we’ll leave you alone.” The Puritans joined a group of about the same number of non-Puritans setting off for the New World. At first there was thought of joining the Popham settlement in Maine, which had been established in 1607 and was prospering. Since most of that colony was made up of Loyalists, Anglicans and more open-minded Protestants, however, they discarded this plan and decided to open a new settlement on the Hudson River. In July 1620 they boarded two ships, the Speedwell and the Mayflower, and set sail from Southampton, England. The Speedwell, a decommissioned warship that had been badly beaten up in the Spanish war, started leaking. Twice they had to turn back, and finally they abandoned the Speedwell altogether. Most of its passengers and supplies were moved onto the Mayflower, which finally set off from Plymouth in September, badly overloaded and over-crowded. By then it was too late in the year to start the venture, but they were anxious to go, so they went anyway. These passengers were a mixture of Puritan, Anglican and various other Protestant settlers, along with Captain Miles Standish and a band of soldiers under his command, who had been hired by the investors to protect the new settlement. After a grueling sea voyage in which many passengers died, the ship was blown off course in a storm and finally saw land at what would later become Provincetown on tip of Cape Cod in Massachusetts Bay. It was too stormy and too late in the year to try to make their way to the Hudson, so they sought a safe harbor, finally dropping anchor in what would become Plymouth Harbor. A few men landed to scout out the territory, and they decided to remain there for the winter. They named the place Plimoth after the English harbor from which they had sailed. They built a few makeshift shelters to use during hunting forays, and they hunkered down to remain on the ship for the winter. They survived the winter on board with ship’s supplies, fish, and game from some hunting on land. Many people died that winter of malnutrition and disease, including scurvy. Although there were no hostilities, there was little contact with the Indians. What contact they had was tense, since neither group had much trust of the other. The settlers considered the

Indians to be savages, and the Indians had had some unpleasant encounters with English slavers a few years before, so both were extra cautious.

At first their relations with the Indians, while not particularly amicable, were relatively peaceful. They were the Pokanokets and Wampanoags, tribes of the Algonquin Nation, and they were not bellicose or strongly territorial. To them, these new Englishmen did not seem aggressive, so they just kept out of their way. There was one striking exception. A Pawtuxet Indian named Tisquantum, better known as Squanto, had been captured in 1614 by the English slaver Thomas Hunt. He and several others were taken to Spain and sold into slavery. He was among a number of slaves who were bought by a group of Franciscan friars and freed. The monks educated them, and they all converted to Roman Catholicism. Squanto went from Spain to England where he met Pocahontas, the Powhattan princess from Virginia who had married John Rolfe, and who was a celebrity in English society. He worked in London as a longshoreman for about 3 years, and he became fluent in English. In 1619 he returned to America, only to find that his entire Pawtuxet tribe had been wiped out by disease, probably smallpox. He was the only surviving Pawtuxet, so he settled among the Wampanoags. When the Mayflower arrived in 1620, Squanto immediately contacted them and brokered a meeting between the English and Pokanoket leaders, and then with the Wampanoags. Because of Squanto's diplomatic talent there were no serious conflicts between the English and the Indians, and when in the spring of 1621 the English came ashore to settle, Squanto lived with them for almost two years. It was he who introduced them to the fur trade and to maize, and he taught them how to farm and fertilize their crops in that terrain. The plantation expanded, and the settlers' hunting increased. This began to affect the Indians' food supply. Tensions increased between them, but Squanto managed to keep the peace. In November of 1622 he developed a fever while on a trading expedition with Governor Bradford to the Popham colony in Maine. Shortly thereafter he died. Squanto remained a faithful Roman Catholic to the day he died, much to the chagrin of the Puritans, who despised Catholicism. Although legend has painted him as a noble savage, Squanto was in fact a very civilized, intelligent and talented practical advisor and diplomat. Without his help it is not likely that the settlement would have survived. It probably would have died out and disappeared, like the Roanoke Colony in Virginia.

Governor Bradford reported that the relations between Plymouth Colony and the Indians were good, and that in 1621 they exchanged harvest goods with them that included maize, other vegetables, fowl, venison, and other game. He did not report any kind of harvest or thanksgiving feast, however. Three important contributions of the Indians were foods that have become staples at Thanksgiving meals today, but which the English settlers had probably never heard of before coming to America. They were maize (that we call corn), pumpkins and other squashes, and cranberries. The common food fowl at the time were ducks, geese, swans and pigeons. There were wild turkeys in the forests, but they were small, tough, and stringy, and there is no evidence that they were considered a desirable food by either the Indians or the

settlers, even though the turkey is indigenous to the western hemisphere. It is believed that the Aztecs were the first to domesticate it. In doing so they developed a fat, tender and tasty bird that was quite different from its wild ancestors. It had been introduced to Europe by the Spanish explorers, but it is doubtful that the English settlers had ever even heard of it, let alone tasted it. Apparently the domesticated ones never made their way to the northeast, and the wild turkeys there were not very good for food. There is no evidence that the Indians ever ate them. The wild turkeys that roam our forests today are descendants of turkeys that were domesticated by English colonists in the early 18th century.

Although Bradford mentioned nothing about any feast, let alone one with the Indians, Edward Winslow, one of the main leaders of the colony, wrote in a letter to a friend a brief description of what has since been described as the first Thanksgiving, or at least the first one at Plymouth. According to Winslow, Massasoit, the king of the Wampanoag Confederation, and ninety other Indians visited the settlers and stayed three days. There was a lavish exchange of gifts of food, and the settlers celebrated by shooting off their guns, which greatly impressed and entertained the Indians. The Indians killed five deer and presented them to the colony. Winslow wrote to his friends in England, "We are so farre from want, that we often wish you partakers of our plentie."

Many of our traditional Thanksgiving symbols are authentic, and many are fictional. The most authentic are corn, pumpkins, and cranberries, all of which were introduced to the settlers by the Indians. One of the most important gifts of the Indians was maize, the grain that we call corn, and that the English call Indian corn. To the British the word corn means any grain, but especially barley, rye, wheat and oats. Maize was unknown to them, even though it had been introduced to Spain by the Spanish explorers from central America a few decades earlier. It had been a staple food in the Americas for centuries, having first been domesticated in Central America in prehistoric times. Another Indian gift was cranberries. The cranberry, which the Indians called *ibini*, "bitter berry," is a very sour but vitamin-rich berry that grows in the acidic bogs around Massachusetts Bay. The Indians taught the settlers to cook them with water and honey, making a delicious sweet-and-sour sauce. They did not know it at the time, but its high vitamin C content is probably one of the main reasons that the settlers did not suffer from scurvy after the first year. The English called it a crane-berry because the flower that hangs over the berry looks like a long-necked bird, a crane, peering down at it. Cranberries are still farmed in Massachusetts and shipped all over the world. Two other foods indigenous to America were probably also at that original feast, but they are not mentioned in the documents. Those are tomatoes, which came to Europe in 1519 but along with pumpkins were used only for decorative purposes, and potatoes, which did not become a common food in Europe until the late 17th century. Potatoes and tomatoes were not accepted as food in Europe until very late because they are both members of the poisonous nightshade family. Except for the fruit of the tomato and the tuber of the potato, both plants are poisonous, containing alkaloids like scopolamine and atropine. Tomatoes and

potatoes were eaten by Indians in the Americas for centuries, though, and they would occasionally use their hallucinogenic poisons in religious rituals.

The Plymouth feast was in the fall of 1621. Contrary to the legend, here is no record of any repeat of this event. In 1630 and again in 1637 there was a celebration upon the arrival of supplies and new settlers from England, but there is no record of any participation of the Indians in either of these events. Relations with the Indians were deteriorating rapidly as a result of arrogance, ignorance, misunderstandings, and sometimes sheer stupidity on the part of both the settlers and the Indian leaders. A major factor in this tension was a huge amount of double-dealing by Uncas, the chief of the Mohicans. He was allegedly an ally of the settlers against the other tribes, but he was a trouble-maker on both sides. James Fenimore Cooper portrayed him as a hero in *The Last of the Mohicans*, but he was in fact far from it. In 1669 tensions erupted into a war that quickly spread from Connecticut to Maine, and is considered to be *per capita* the bloodiest war in American history. It was led on the Indian side by Massasoit's son Metacomet, known to the English as King Philip, who organized almost all the tribes in New England under his command. The barbaric atrocities perpetrated by both sides were horrifying. Metacomet was finally defeated in 1676. The next celebration by the settlers of which there is any record was in that year, when they celebrated the defeat of the Wampanoags and all their allies. The 1676 feast reached a grand climax when Metacomet's head was presented on a pike. It remained on display in the center of the village for the next 20 years. That event was celebrated as a holiday in New England annually for decades. It did not fade away until the revolution grasped everyone's attention 100 years after Metacomet's death. It was not celebrated as a formal festival, however, but with rowdy drunken men going from door to door demanding treats and whisky. In time a mummers' parade developed as part of the celebration. It was almost an undisciplined drunken combination of the worst features of both Halloween and Mardi Gras. Because the Puritans considered Christmas and Easter to be corrupt Roman Catholic observances with no biblical justification, it was illegal to celebrate them as religious holidays. Both were observed in New England with no religious significance, but with the same drunken rowdiness until well into the 18th century. Until the middle of the 19th century New Year's Eve, Washington's birthday, and July 4th were celebrated in much the same way. The vestige of this remains to this day in our Thanksgiving and Fourth of July parades and in our rowdy New Year celebrations, particularly masquerade parties.

There are many other symbols of Thanksgiving that are associated with the Plymouth feast and yet are not authentic. Notwithstanding, they have become so ingrained into our culture that they have come to symbolize the warmth and family unity of the feast, and thus have gained validity. Many of these traditional symbols are seen on Thanksgiving cards and decorations. One, of course, is the turkey. It was not eaten in Plymouth, but once it was domesticated in the mid-18th century, it became a popular food in America. Another is the sheaf of wheat that represents the harvest. Wheat does not grow at all well in the New England terrain or climate, and it is

doubtful that the northeastern Indians even knew about it. It also was not an important crop in England, where the main grain crops were barley, rye and oats. Wheat was expensive, and was mainly eaten only by the rich. We don't know whether it was intentional or an oversight, but apparently the settlers did not bring any seed grain with them from England, so their only grain was corn. When corn is harvested it is not tied into sheaves the way wheat is, so sheaves of wheat, although a common Thanksgiving symbol, are not authentic. Another incorrect symbol is the men's clothing. We depict the Puritans in plain black clothes with large white collars, crowned hats and buckles on their hats and shoes. In fact, they usually wore colors, albeit not bright or gaudy ones. One reason is that black dye is the most expensive of all dyes, even purple. Just as today, black with a starched white collar was worn only on formal occasions. Their clothing was plain and stern, however, with no jewelry, and no fancy buttons, lace, ribbons or other such decorations. They certainly would not wear buckles on their hats or shoes. No decent Christian would disgrace himself with such ostentatious foppish frippery. Women dressed more or less like we traditionally depict them, except that they too wore subdued colors rather than black or gray, and shunned jewelry and fancy decoration.

The traditional Thanksgiving-decoration Indian clothing is also incorrect. What is usually depicted is the ceremonial costumes of the western Plains Indians, most often those of the Lakota Sioux. That includes beaded and fringed deerskin breeches and shirt, knee-length dresses for the women, bone breastplates, and the ornate feathered "war bonnet." None of these were worn, or probably even known, by the Indians of New England. Their clothing was ultra-simple—they usually wore nothing at all, or sometimes only a short loincloth. On occasions when they wore anything else, it was for ceremonial purposes, not as body protection. This generally consisted of a knee-length skirt for the women, and trouser-like leggings for the men. Neither men nor women wore anything above the waist unless the cold weather required it, and even in the deep winter they wore little or nothing except on ceremonial occasions. To keep warm, they would wrap a blanket around themselves. Their ceremonial clothing was often decorated with beads, shells and dyed porcupine quills. They usually went barefoot, but they sometimes wore deerskin moccasins. Their headdress consisted of a beaded headband, and occasionally they would wear one or two feathers in it indicating their status in the tribe. Unlike the Sioux, where each feather represented a military coup, the Wampanoag feathers were tribal symbols or pure decoration. The chief, as a symbol of his office, wore heavily decorated royal garments when he was on official business, including a headband with several feathers pointed straight up. Women wore their hair long, while men shaved their heads, sometimes leaving a scalp-lock or a Mohawk-like strip on top. Warriors often had tattoos. Men usually painted their faces in a solid color that denoted how they felt that day. The main colors were red for life and vigor, yellow for happiness, black for death or sadness, and white for the spiritual world. Purple meant royalty. It is interesting to note that in almost every culture in history purple has been associated with royalty. Both men and women wore necklaces, sometimes very ornate, made from a variety of natural

materials.

With the final adoption of the Constitution and the election of George Washington as President in 1788, the United States was officially established and recognized as an independent nation. Shortly after his inauguration in 1789, Washington recommended an annual day of thanksgiving for God's blessings on our nation. He suggested November 26th, and proclaimed that day as Thanksgiving Day. It was observed on that date every year during his eight years in office, but his successors were not so passionate about it. John Adams unenthusiastically continued it during his four-year tenure, but Thomas Jefferson stopped it. He was openly opposed to any religious holiday being proclaimed by the government. James Madison resumed it, but after his presidency it was ignored again. From 1817 until 1863 Thanksgiving Day was observed only in some local areas and by a few states on a variety of dates.

Sarah Josepha Hale, the author of the children's poem "Mary Had a Little Lamb" was the editor of the highly popular *Godey's Magazine and Ladies' Book*. In 1843 she published the first of a series of editorials urging the celebration of what she called the Great American Festival. She argued that a national day focusing on giving thanks to God would have a unifying effect, and might be a factor in helping to avert a civil war. In these editorials she called the settlers Pilgrims. That was the first time that word had ever been applied to them. She may have picked that up from the fact that Edward Winslow's stepson, the first Mayflower child born on American soil, was named Peregrine. In Latin *peregrinus* means wandering foreigner, but it is often translated pilgrim. Sara Hale promulgated the myth of the settlers' warm friendship with the Indians and the annual repeat of the feast. She described their Thanksgiving feast as the story that we still tell today, and the legend gained its first strong foothold. Abraham Lincoln saw the wisdom of her argument, and on October 3, 1863, in the middle of the War, he proclaimed, "It has seemed to me fit and proper that these gifts should be solemnly, reverently, and gratefully acknowledged as with one heart and voice by the whole American people; I do, therefore, invite my fellow-citizens in every part of the United States ... to set apart and observe the last Thursday of November next as a Day of Thanksgiving and Prayer to our beneficent Father who dwelleth in the heavens."

The Thanksgiving Day that Sarah Hale and Abraham Lincoln envisioned was to be focused on the family. Both of them discouraged festive community celebrations, but wanted to support a strong family reunification, emphasizing the virtues of hospitality, civility, and family unity over political and ideological divisions. This was particularly important in 1863, when so many families were divided over the issues of the war, in some cases even with brothers or fathers and sons fighting in opposing armies. Sarah Josepha Hale is often called the "Mother of Thanksgiving." It was her urging that prompted Lincoln to proclaim an annual observance of Thanksgiving as a national holiday. It remained on the fourth Thursday of November until 1939, when Franklin D. Roosevelt, under pressure from merchants to extend the Christmas shopping season, moved it to the third Thursday. Neither Congress nor the American people were happy with this decision, however, and in 1941, when pressure

from Congress exceeded than from the merchants, Roosevelt signed a law making the fourth Thursday the permanent date of the holiday. It has remained so ever since.

Thanksgiving has remained not only a public celebration, but more importantly, the celebration of family unity that Sarah Hale and Abraham Lincoln envisioned. As the American Family becomes increasingly divided in today's decaying society, we need to give thanks that we have such a feast, and pray for the restoration of unity and harmony in America today.