

A Few Facts about Thanksgiving

The Indians who lived near where the ship the *Mayflower* landed were called Wampanoag (pronounced WAMP-ah-nog). Even before the settlers arrived, the Wampanoag had met explorers. These Europeans brought diseases, and it is believed that because the Wampanoag had not built up resistance to these diseases, many died quickly from an epidemic. Some have theorized that the epidemic was like the plague that once wiped out almost half the population of Europe.

The Wampanoag had farmed the land, but they had been so decimated by the epidemic that when the *Mayflower* settlers arrived, they found whole villages and fields with skeletons in them. So many people had died that there was nobody left to bury them. The settlers raided the graves that they found and stole food from supplies that the Wampanoag had stored for the winter. The Wampanoag were furious, but were no match for the settlers' guns.

The few Wampanoag who were left were worried about the enemies they already had, who were eager to defeat them. The Wampanoag needed allies, especially against another Native people known as the Narragansett. They saw that the settlers had guns that could be very useful.

The settlers were a mixed group. About 37 of them were Separatists (who became known as Pilgrims), seeking religious freedom from the Church of England. Others were sympathetic to the Separatist cause and beliefs, but not members of the group. Others had skills that the Separatists knew they would need, such as barrel-making or soldiering.

There were 102 people on the ship, of which 18 were adult women. Three of the women were pregnant. The settlers had arrived at the worst time of year, in winter. By the end of the first winter, about half the settlers had died. Four adult women and eleven teenage girls remained.

The Wampanoag were willing to help the starving settlers because they could see that the settlers could be useful. The most famous person to help was named Tisquantum, often called Squanto. He had lived in Patuxet, but was captured in 1605 when he was 12 or 13 and taken as a slave to England. He managed to get back to the colony but was captured again as a slave and taken to Spain. He escaped again and again returned to his village. This time, he discovered that almost everyone was dead. He was the only male survivor. Tisquantum showed the settlers how to plant the traditional crops of corn, beans, and squash that saved the remaining settlers from starvation.

The Wampanoag had a tradition of harvest festivals. So did the settlers. In fact, every farming culture has some version of a harvest festival. These festivals were not the same as days of thanksgiving, which both the Indigenous people and the Europeans marked as religious ceremonies.

There are different versions of what happened on the "first" Thanksgiving. Some say that the Wampanoag, who also had a good harvest, prepared a feast (cooked by the women) and brought it to the settlers. Several weeks after the event, settler Edward Winslow wrote:

[O]ur harvest being gotten in, our governor sent four men on fowling, that so we might after a more special manner rejoice together, after we had gathered the fruit 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 recreations, we exercised our arms, many of the Indians coming amongst us, and among 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. 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; . . . yea, it hath pleased God so to possess the Indians with a fear of us. . .

This letter (full text at <http://mayflowerhistory.com/letter-winslow-1621/>) makes us think that the Wampanoag weren't even invited but came because they heard the gunfire. Once they were there, the settlers invited them to join the celebration. They went out and killed five deer as their contribution to the celebration.

The settlers and the Wampanoag signed a peace treaty, and all went well for a while, but the settlers wanted more and more land. So by 1675, the Wampanoag decided to fight. The war was one of the bloodiest in U.S. history and ended with almost all the Wampanoag being killed.

During the American Revolution, there were some days of thanksgiving, but up until the Civil War, only George Washington's birthday and the Fourth of July were national holidays. For 17 years, Sarah Josepha Hale, an influential editor from New England, wrote to five different presidents calling for a national day of thanks. Abraham Lincoln finally set aside the last Thursday of November in 1863, during the Civil War. Franklin Roosevelt changed it to the fourth Thursday in November.