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Links

"From Sea to Shining Sea: Thanksgiving Becomes a National Holiday," online exhibit at Pilgrim Hall Museum website

Plimoth Plantation's "You are the Historian" allows students to investigate the first Thanksgiving online.

Plimoth Plantation's exhibit, Thanksgiving, Memory, Myth & Meaning

"The Wampanoag: People of the First Life" website developed by the Boston's Children's Museum

If You Go...

[Plimoth Plantation](#) is open seven days a week from the end of March April through November.

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On this day...

...in 1970, a group of Native Americans attending a Thanksgiving feast in Plymouth walked out in protest. The Indians and their supporters gathered on a hill overlooking Plymouth Rock near a statue of Massasoit, the Wampanoag leader who had greeted the *Mayflower* passengers 350 years earlier. The protesters spoke about their long struggle to preserve their land and culture. The fourth Thursday in November was not a day for thanksgiving and feasting, they declared, but for grieving and fasting. As most Americans continued to observe the holiday in what had become the customary way — with football, parades, and family gatherings — the native people of Massachusetts began a new tradition: a "National Day of Mourning," held in lieu of Thanksgiving celebrations.

Background

A century ago, when heavy immigration brought large numbers of southern and eastern Europeans to the United States, civic groups and educators set out to "Americanize" these new citizens. At settlement houses, workplaces, and public schools, immigrants were taught to see the [Pilgrims](#) as models for their own families. The story of the "First Thanksgiving" was a key element in the curriculum. The tale of Pilgrims and Indians sharing a feast of turkey, stuffing, cranberry sauce, and pumpkin pie became part of American lore.

The problem is that the familiar version of the "First Thanksgiving" is largely a myth — a myth that misrepresents the experience of the native people at Plymouth in 1620. The traditional Thanksgiving story evokes, and is usually taught as, a benign and mutually beneficial relationship between the Pilgrims and their Indian contacts. Many Native Americans believe this happy fiction hides the truth of how they were dispossessed of their lands, their religion, and their traditional way of life when the English colonists came to Massachusetts.

Even the phrase the "First Thanksgiving" is a misnomer. The [Wampanoag Indians](#) who lived in Plymouth Colony before the arrival of the Pilgrims considered all of nature to be a sacred gift from the Creator. They had been holding ceremonies to give thanks for plentiful harvests or other good fortune from time immemorial. The English settlers were also accustomed to setting aside a day of prayerful thanksgiving for divine providences; indeed, the English proclaimed a day of Thanksgiving for their safe arrival at Jamestown years before the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth. The celebration that took place at Plymouth in the fall of 1621 was a traditional harvest celebration. Thanksgiving Day as we now know it would not develop for another 200 years.

After an abundant harvest in the fall of 1621, the Pilgrims

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Teachers' Features

This *Moment* is part of a Teachers' Features lesson plan.

Using Mass Moments in Third Grade Classrooms

[3.2 Identify the Wampanoags and their leaders at the time the Pilgrims arrived, and describe their way of life.](#)

[3.3 Identify who the Pilgrims were and explain why they left Europe to seek religious freedom; describe their journey and their early years in the Plymouth Colony.](#)

decided to celebrate by holding a three-day feast with games and gun-firing. One of the colonists reported, "[M]any of the Indians [came] amongst us [including Massasoit and 90 men] whom for three days we entertained and feasted, and they went out and killed five Deer, which they brought to the Plantation." Food historians say that the menu probably featured duck, geese, turkey, pumpkin, squash, corn, and fresh and dried fruits, and berries (but no pies, since there was not enough flour or butter for crusts). The Indians would have understood this as the sort of gift-giving and celebration that they were accustomed to sharing with friends and allies.

Sadly, the good relations that marked the early contact between the Plymouth colonists and the native people did not last. Within a few decades, tension between the newcomers and the native people turned to [open conflict](#); by 1700, warfare and disease forced most of the region's surviving Indians onto reservations controlled by whites.

Political and religious leaders continued to declare days of fasting when times were hard and days of thanksgiving prayer when they were good. By the beginning of the eighteenth century, thanksgiving days in the fall had become annual events. The morning was spent in worship at the meetinghouse; the afternoon, feasting on the fruits of the harvest. An increasingly mobile population welcomed the annual Thanksgiving as an opportunity for loved ones to return home. By the second quarter of the nineteenth century, the day was a nearly sacred family occasion in New England.

In the 1840s, Sarah Josepha Hale, the editor of an influential women's magazine, launched a campaign to make Thanksgiving a national holiday. New Englanders had taken the custom with them when they moved west, but it was observed on different dates in different states and territories. Hale hoped that a national day of thanksgiving would strengthen family ties and bring unity to a country approaching civil war. Hale finally succeeded in 1863, when Abraham Lincoln proclaimed that the fourth Thursday of November be set aside to give thanks and praise for the nation's blessings. Not surprisingly, white Southerners considered Thanksgiving a "Yankee holiday"; it was not widely celebrated in the South until the Spanish-American war reunited the nation against a common foe.

As Thanksgiving became a fixture of American culture, the story of the "First Thanksgiving," with its misrepresentation of the native experience, remained largely unchanged. In 1970 the protest in Plymouth began the process of educating the nation about the history and survival of the Wampanoag people.

Sources

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