



The First Thanksgiving: Separating Fact from Folklore

Almost every American schoolchild can describe the First Thanksgiving: Pilgrims dressed in black hats sharing turkey with friendly Indians around a festive table. The problem is that much of this familiar picture comes from later tradition rather than eyewitness history. Historians actually possess only two contemporary accounts describing the famous harvest celebration of 1621. The event itself certainly occurred, but many of the details we associate with Thanksgiving today are based more on folklore than on historical evidence.

Autumn 1621: What We Actually Know

One of the two surviving firsthand accounts comes from Edward Winslow, who described the celebration in a letter written in December 1621:

"Our harvest being gotten in, our Governor sent four men on fowling, that so we might after a more special manner rejoice together...; they four in one day killed as much fowl as, with a little help beside, served the Company almost a week, at which time, among other Recreations, we exercised our Arms, many of the Indians coming amongst us... 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..."

The second contemporary source comes from Governor William Bradford's *Of Plymouth Plantation*, written about twenty years later. Bradford confirmed that the celebration took place but offered few additional details.

Those two documents form the foundation of nearly everything historians know about the First Thanksgiving.

Pilgrim "Thanksgiving" Meant Something Different

What is almost certain, however, is that the Pilgrims themselves would not have regarded this gathering as a "Thanksgiving" in the modern sense.

To the Pilgrims, a **thanksgiving** was a solemn religious observance devoted to prayer, worship, and often fasting as an expression of gratitude to God. Their religious calendar included special days of thanksgiving, but those occasions were not festive banquets.

History records one such true Pilgrim Thanksgiving in 1623, when an extended drought finally ended with desperately needed rainfall. The colonists responded not with feasting but with prayer and worship.

The Harvest Celebration

The three-day gathering with their Wampanoag guests in the autumn of 1621 was instead a traditional English harvest festival, a custom the Pilgrims had brought from Europe.

Even so, they certainly had much to celebrate. Against overwhelming odds, they had survived their first brutal New England winter. That survival owed much to the generosity and guidance of the Wampanoag people, especially Squanto, who taught the newcomers how to grow corn, gather shellfish, catch fish, and adapt to an unfamiliar environment.

The harvest festival became both a celebration of a successful crop and an expression of gratitude for friendships that had helped make survival possible.

What Was on the Table?

So what foods actually appeared at that first celebration?

Edward Winslow mentioned that four English hunters gathered enough **wild fowl** to feed the settlement for nearly a week, while the Wampanoag contributed **five deer**. Wild turkey certainly existed in New England, but Winslow never specifically mentioned it. The "fowl" could have included ducks, geese, swans, or wild turkey, although waterfowl appear more likely.

Corn almost certainly formed an important part of the meal, along with squash, pumpkins, onions, beans, shellfish, fish, and other locally available foods. Venison supplied by the Wampanoag was probably one of the principal dishes.

The Myth of Turkey and Pumpkin Pie

Many of today's Thanksgiving favorites were almost certainly absent.

White potatoes, sweet potatoes, and yams had not yet become part of the Plymouth diet. Cranberries certainly grew wild in Massachusetts, but without plentiful sugar they would have been far too tart to resemble today's cranberry sauce.

Pumpkin pie also appears to be a later invention. The Pilgrims probably ate roasted or boiled pumpkin, but they lacked butter and sufficient wheat flour to make pie crusts. More importantly, they had not yet constructed baking ovens capable of producing pies.

The familiar Thanksgiving menu gradually evolved over the next two centuries rather than appearing all at once in 1621.

1863: Lincoln Creates a National Holiday

Throughout the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, communities celebrated occasional local days of thanksgiving, often marking abundant harvests, military victories, or other important events. There was no annual national Thanksgiving holiday.

That changed during the darkest days of the Civil War.

For many years, Sarah Josepha Hale, editor of the popular magazine *Godey's Lady's Book*, had campaigned tirelessly for a national Thanksgiving holiday. She believed such a celebration could strengthen national unity.

In October 1863, President Abraham Lincoln responded by proclaiming a national Thanksgiving to be observed on the last Thursday of November. He urged Americans to give thanks despite the hardships of war and intentionally chose the occasion as an opportunity for citizens on both sides of the conflict to reflect upon the blessings that still united them.

Following Lincoln's proclamation, every president continued the tradition. In 1941, Congress permanently established Thanksgiving as a federal holiday to be celebrated on the fourth Thursday of November, and President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the measure into law.

The Enduring Symbol

Whether the Pilgrims ate turkey or pumpkin pie matters far less than what actually occurred during the autumn of 1621. English settlers and Wampanoag Indians, despite profound cultural differences, gathered peacefully to celebrate a successful harvest and the friendships that had enabled a struggling colony to survive.

That simple expression of gratitude—born from hardship, cooperation, and hope—has endured for more than four centuries. While many familiar Thanksgiving traditions have grown through legend and changing customs, the deeper message of thankfulness, generosity, and shared community remains one of America's most enduring historical legacies.