

The Wampanoag and the First Thanksgiving

- ∞ The history of Thanksgiving goes much further back than Plymouth 1621. In fact, people across the world from every culture have been celebrating and giving thanks for thousands of years. Long before English colonists arrived, Native People celebrated many different days of thanksgiving. “Strawberry Thanksgiving” and “Green Corn Thanksgiving” are just two of kinds of celebrations for the Wampanoag and other Native People.
- ∞ One of the earlier contacts between the Wampanoag and Europeans dates from the 16th century, when merchant vessels and fishing boats traveled along the coast of present-day New England. Captains of merchant vessels captured Native Americans and sold them as slaves for profit.
- ∞ For example, Captain Thomas Hunt captured a Patuxet named Squanto (or Tisquantum) in 1614, and sold him to Spanish monks who tried to convert him. Eventually Squanto was set free. Despite his prior experiences, he again boarded an English ship to accompany an expedition to Newfoundland as a translator. From Newfoundland he made his way back to his homeland in 1619, only to discover that the entire Patuxet tribe and his family had fallen victim to an epidemic.
- ∞ In 1620, religious separatists and others from England who are known today as “Pilgrims” arrived in present-day Plymouth, MA, where Squanto and other Wampanoags taught the starving Pilgrims how to cultivate corn, farm squash and beans, catch fish, and collect seafood.
- ∞ In 1621, the English colonists at Plymouth had a three-day feast to celebrate their first harvest. More than 90 native Wampanoag People joined the 50 English colonists in the festivities. Historians do not know for sure why the Wampanoag joined the gathering or what activities went on for those three days. From the one short paragraph that was written about the celebration at the time, we know that they ate, drank, and played games. (Back in England, English people celebrated harvest by feasting and playing games in much the same way.)
- ∞ The English did not call the 1621 event a “thanksgiving.” Their understanding of a day of “thanksgiving” would have meant a day of prayer to thank God when something really good happened. So the pilgrims had their first actual thanksgiving in the summer of 1623, when they gave thanks to God for the rain that ended a long drought.
- ∞ Contemporary celebrations of the Thanksgiving holiday focus on the idea that the “first Thanksgiving” was a friendly gathering of two disparate groups – or even neighbors – who shared a meal and lived harmoniously. In actuality, the gathering of these people had much more to do with political alliances, diplomacy, and an effort at temporary peaceful coexistence.