

Thanksgiving: How Much is Myth?

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Every year on Thanksgiving, we celebrate the idea that English settlers and Native Americans sat down to enjoy a feast together. We give thanks that they supported each other. In schools, children dress up as “Pilgrims” and “Indians” and act out this story of friendship between the two peoples. But, in fact, this history is mostly myth. Here are some common myths about Thanksgiving:

Myth #1: The colonists who came on the Mayflower were Pilgrims seeking freedom of religion.

A “pilgrim” is a person who takes a long journey to a place for religious reasons. The Protestants who came to North America on the Mayflower did take such a journey to break away from the Church of England. But they went to Holland, where they were free to practice their religion without persecution. They worried, though, that Holland’s secular life was too tempting for their children.¹ So they set out to establish a “Holy Kingdom” in the “New World” and, like earlier settlers, to make money. Like other colonists, they believed that they had the right to claim the land of the “heathens” who already lived there.²

Myth #2: The Wampanoag Indians welcomed the Mayflower settlers.

“By the time the Mayflower arrived at Plymouth, Massachusetts, in December 1620, Europeans had been founding colonies on the North American continent for well over a century.”³ During that time, exposure to European diseases had led to pandemics among the Natives up and down the coast from Florida to New England. In 1614, English explorers returned to Europe with enslaved Native Americans, and left smallpox behind. By 1620, entire nations of New England Natives were decimated from disease.⁴

The Mayflower colonists landed on the ancestral land of the Wampanoag people. For centuries, the Wampanoag grew corn and other crops on



National Day of Mourning, hosted by the United American Indians of New England, is held in Plymouth, Mass., every Thanksgiving. In this picture, people gather “In the spirit of Metacom,” who was also known as King Philip. Research Metacom and the King Philip’s War to learn more. Image on the right: A statue of Chief Massasoit.

the land. They were a large and powerful nation, organized into 69 villages, but now they were weakened from disease.⁵

Arriving in winter, the Mayflower colonists needed food. They scouted the land, and found hidden stores of corn, which they stole. They also stole items from Native burial sites.⁶

Within a few days of their arrival, the head Wampanoag *sachem* (chief), Massasoit, appeared at the Plymouth colony. He was concerned about the shifting balance of power among Native tribes because of the plague, and wanted to form an alliance with the colonists. They negotiated a formal treaty, outlining a relationship of peace and mutual protection.⁷

Myth #3: The colonists invited the Native Americans to a special feast to thank them for their aid.

Harvest celebrations were common to both the Wampanoag and the English settlers. As Abenaki scholar, Judy Dow explains, “Long before the

Europeans set foot on these shores, Native peoples gave thanks every day for all the gifts of life.”⁸ Native American writers Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz and Dina Gilio-Whitaker further describe how spiritual ceremonies of gratitude and reciprocity with nature had always been a central part of their cultures. The Europeans also, for centuries, had days of thanksgiving to celebrate harvests.⁹

The “first” Thanksgiving in 1621 was just a regular English harvest celebration, which is why there’s little historical record of the event and no evidence that any Native Americans were invited. When the Native people heard the gunshots of the hunting colonists, they alerted Massasoit, who showed up with 90 men. They were asked to stay, but, since there wasn’t enough food to go around, they left and came back with five deer and many turkeys. The visit was likely the first of a series of political meetings to discuss and secure a military alliance.¹⁰

Myth #4: The European colonists lived in peace with the Native Americans.

Relations between the colonists and Native Americans began to deteriorate quickly. Within a generation, tensions over land theft by the European settlers had grown and hostilities were erupting. In 1637, settlers burned a Pequot village in Mystic Fort, and killed hundreds of Pequot men, women, and children.¹¹

Nevertheless, an uneasy alliance held until Massasoit’s death in 1661. But the colonists’ unrelenting pressure for land eventually led to war. In 1675, “King Philip’s War” was one of the bloodiest, most violent conflicts ever fought on American soil.¹² By its end, most of the Indian peoples of the Northeast region had been killed or sold into slavery. Some escaped to Canada.¹³

Myth #5: The Thanksgiving holiday celebrates the 1621 feast.

There have been many declared days of “Thanks-



giving” in U.S. history. Some were held in the colonies to celebrate victories over Native Americans (such as the 1637 raid on Mystic). In 1789, George Washington declared a “National Day of Thanksgiving” to give thanks to God.¹⁴

The Thanksgiving that is currently on the calendar for the fourth Thursday of every November didn’t become a federal holiday until 1863, when President Lincoln officially declared a national day of Thanksgiving during the Civil War. He wanted there to be a day for families to be together, to mourn their dead and be grateful for the living, and to rouse northern patriotism for a war that was not going well.¹⁵

None of the declared holidays referred to the feast in 1621.

Truth vs. Myth: Know the Difference!

There are many reasons that we should make an effort to know the truth about our history. If we don’t know the truth, we may be supporting stereotypes. We may be accepting a version of history that makes us feel better about our past. We may be shielding ourselves from the reality of how the United States got started.

Endnotes: 1. Mika Doyle, 11/14/18, <www.bustle.com/p/9-myths-about-thanksgiving-the-real-facts-behind-them-13123858>; 2. Judy Dow, 6/12/06, <oyate.org/index.php/resources/43-resources/thanksgiving>; 3. Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz and Dina Gilio-Whitaker, 11/21/16, <billmoyers.com/story/real-thanksgiving-story>; 4. Ibid.; 5. Ibid.; 6. Doyle, op. cit.; 7. Dunbar-Ortiz and Gilio-Whitaker, op. cit.; 8. Dow, op. cit.; 9. Dunbar-Ortiz and Gilio-Whitaker, op. cit.; 10. Dow, op. cit., and Dunbar-Ortiz and Gilio-Whitaker, op. cit.; 11. Dow, op. cit.; 12. Dunbar-Ortiz and Gilio-Whitaker, op. cit.; 13. Dow, op. cit.; 14. Doyle, op. cit.; 15. <www.abrahamlincolnonline.org/lincoln/speeches/thanks.htm>.

AFTER YOU READ:

1. Choose one myth you’d like to learn more about and dig up more information.
2. Divide into small groups, each taking one myth. For that myth, identify what’s untrue about the myth and why it matters.

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