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The Plymouth Thanksgiving Story

By Chuck Larsen
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What is often called the "First Thanksgiving" was a feast that included English settlers and Native Americans in 1621. The feast was a celebration of the settlers' successful harvest, which the Native Americans played a large role in by teaching the settlers how to successfully grow new kinds of crops. Native American historian and author Chuck Larsen remembers hearing the story as a child and realizing that the Thanksgiving story usually does not focus on the story from the perspective of the Wampanoag, the Indians who helped the Pilgrims. Larsen includes additional details about the Wampanoag in this version of the Thanksgiving story. Thanksgiving has been celebrated as an official federal holiday since 1873. As you read, take notes on how the version of Thanksgiving told in this article is different from versions of the first Thanksgiving that you have heard before.

- [1] When the Pilgrims crossed the Atlantic Ocean in 1620,¹ they landed on the rocky shores of a territory that was inhabited² by the Wampanoag (Wam-pa NO-ag) Indians. The Wampanoags were part of the Algonkian-speaking peoples, a large group that was part of the Woodland Culture area.³ These Indians lived in villages along the coast of what is now Massachusetts and Rhode Island. They lived in round-roofed houses called wigwams. These were made of poles covered with flat sheets of elm or birch bark.⁴ Wigwams differ in construction from tipis⁵ that were used by Indians of the Great Plains.



"The First Thanksgiving at Plymouth" by Jennie Augusta Brownscombe is in the public domain.

The Wampanoags moved several times during each year in order to get food. In the spring they would fish in the rivers for salmon and herring.⁶ In the planting season they moved to the forest to hunt deer and other animals. After the end of the hunting season people moved inland where there was greater protection from the weather. From December to April they lived on food that they stored during the earlier months.

The basic dress for men was the breechclout, a length of deerskin looped over a belt in back and in front. Women wore deerskin wrap-around skirts. Deerskin leggings and fur capes made from deer, beaver, otter, and bearskins gave protection during the colder seasons, and deerskin moccasins⁷ were worn on the feet. Both men and women usually braided their hair and a single feather was often worn in the back of the hair by men. They did not have the large feathered headdresses worn by people in the Plains Culture area.

1. In 1620, about 100 men and women from Europe sailed to the Americas aboard a ship called the Mayflower because they wanted to start a new life where they could practice their religious beliefs freely.
2. **Inhabit (verb):** to live in
3. a large area referring to what is currently the eastern United States
4. Elm and birch are both types of trees.
5. A tipi is a cone shaped tent made of animal skins traditionally used by Native American people to live in.
6. a type fish of fish found in the Northeastern United States

There were two language groups of Indians in New England at this time. The Iroquois were neighbors to the Algonkian-speaking people. Leaders of the Algonquin and Iroquois people were called “sachems” (SAY-chems). Each village had its own sachem and tribal council. Political power flowed upward from the people. Any individual, man or woman, could participate, but among the Algonquians more political power was held by men. Among the Iroquois, however, women held the deciding vote in the final selection of who would represent the group. Both men and women enforced⁸ the laws of the village and helped solve problems. The details of their democratic system were so impressive that about 150 years later Benjamin Franklin invited the Iroquois to Albany, New York, to explain their system to a delegation⁹ who then developed the “Albany Plan of Union.” This document later served as a model for the Articles of Confederation and the Constitution of the United States.¹⁰

- [5] These Indians of the Eastern Woodlands called the turtle, the deer and the fish their brothers. They respected the forest and everything in it as equals. Whenever a hunter made a kill, he was careful to leave behind some bones or meat as a spiritual offering, to help other animals survive. Not to do so would be considered greedy. The Wampanoags also treated each other with respect. Any visitor to a Wampanoag home was provided with a share of whatever food the family had, even if the supply was low. This same courtesy¹¹ was extended to the Pilgrims when they met.

We can only guess what the Wampanoags must have thought when they first saw the strange ships of the Pilgrims arriving on their shores. But their custom¹² was to help visitors, and they treated the newcomers with courtesy. It was mainly because of their kindness that the Pilgrims survived at all. The wheat the Pilgrims had brought with them to plant would not grow in the rocky soil. They needed to learn new ways for a new world, and the man who came to help them was called “Tisquantum” (TIS-SKWAN-tum) or “Squanto” (SKWAN-toe).

Squanto was originally from the village of Patuxet (Pa TUK et) and a member of the Pokanokit Wampanoag nation. Patuxet once stood on the exact site where the Pilgrims built Plymouth. In 1605, fifteen years before the Pilgrims came, Squanto went to England with a friendly English explorer named John Weymouth. He had many adventures and learned to speak English. Squanto came back to New England with Captain Weymouth. Later Squanto was captured by a British slaver who raided the village and sold Squanto to the Spanish in the Caribbean Islands. A Spanish Franciscan priest befriended Squanto and helped him to get to Spain and later on a ship to England. Squanto then found Captain Weymouth, who paid his way back to his homeland. In England Squanto met Samoset of the Wabanake (Wab-NAH-key) Tribe, who had also left his native home with an English explorer. They both returned together to Patuxet in 1620. When they arrived, the village was deserted¹³ and there were skeletons everywhere. Everyone in the village had died from an illness the English slavers had left behind. Squanto and Samoset went to stay with a neighboring village of Wampanoags.

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7. A moccasin is a flat shoe, traditionally made of animal skin and worn by Native Americans.
 8. **Enforce** (*verb*): to make sure rules and laws are followed
 9. a group of people chosen to vote and represent others
 10. The Articles of Confederation was the document that organized United States government after the American Revolutionary War. Some leaders thought the United States could be organized even better, and wrote the Constitution of the United States, which replaced the Articles of Confederation.
 11. **Courtesy** (*noun*): polite and kind behavior
 12. **Custom** (*noun*): a tradition or practice that is specific to group, place, or society
 13. **Desert** (*verb*): to abandon or leave