

## Mayflower Pilgrims and the History of the American Thanksgiving Holiday

In 1620, the English settlers attempted to land near mouth of the Hudson River, but found themselves at Cape Cod Harbor. During that year they settled and created the first American colony, known as Plymouth<sup>\*\*</sup>. It was the first permanent settlement in the new American colony. As friendships formed with their Wampanoag neighbors they learned new techniques for growing food and survival which was critically important for their survival. The Thanksgiving feast allowed the Pilgrims to show appreciation for their good fortunes of freedom and the new skills of hunting, farming and fishing taught to them by their Indian neighbors. They would not have survived that first year without the help of the Wampanoag Indians. Camaraderie and goodwill existed between the two distinctly different cultures. It was a time to give thanks and celebrate the bountiful harvest.

As Americans we always associate the 102 pilgrims who arrived on the Mayflower with the traditional Thanksgiving holiday. Sometime in 1621, during the month of September, the Mayflower pilgrims and the Wampanoag Indians joined together and celebrated the fall harvest. The celebration was based on English harvest festivals, which traditionally occurred in September. After the Plymouth colonists completed the plentiful first harvest, Gov. William Bradford proclaimed a day of thanksgiving and celebration. He unified the success of the harvest and the friendships formed during that first year was a reason to celebrate.

This Thanksgiving was a great success. Everyone ate their fill and enjoyed the fruits of their good fortune. Thanksgiving traditions have always revolved around food. Today, turkey is the symbol of Thanksgiving. Many historians agree that turkey was probably eaten at the first Thanksgiving. Most likely there were other types of meat on the menu too, such as venison and seafood. There were probably very few, if any, vegetables at the Thanksgiving feast. Foods that adorn our tables today, such as mashed potatoes, yams, squashes and other vegetables, were not on the menu. Neither the pilgrims nor the Indians had a way to keep vegetables fresh that far into fall. Another obvious difference would be lack of desserts at the first Thanksgiving. The pilgrims were running low on sugar and flour, so pies and baked goods were not served. Dessert may have been boiled pumpkin, berries, and plums that autumn of 1621.

The celebration was a joyous time with three days of feasting. The celebration included eating, dancing and playing games. They did not call it a Thanksgiving. In the eyes of the English pilgrims, the feast with the Indians was not a religious holiday or a day of prayer. In their tradition, a Thanksgiving would have included going to church and thanking God for a specific event.

\*\* Plymouth was the first American colony in New England.

The descendants of the Mayflower did not celebrate Thanksgiving yearly or on a specific day as we do today. It took many years for Thanksgiving to become an annual event, with a universally accepted date, and to be celebrated as a federal holiday. Various Thanksgiving-type celebrations were held irregularly during the fall months for nearly 150 years before it was suggested by the Continental Congress that the country should have a national day of thanks. Several U.S. presidents, including George Washington, would from time to time decree a single time Thanksgiving holiday. It was not until 1863, when Abraham Lincoln declared Thanksgiving a national holiday to be celebrated on the last Thursday of November, Perhaps he correlated it with November 21, the date when the Mayflower anchored in what is now Cape Cod. After Lincoln's declaration Thanksgiving was a yearly celebration. Since that time, every president has issued a Thanksgiving Day Proclamation on Thanksgiving, declaring it to be a national day of thanks. In 1939, President Franklin Roosevelt declared that the Thanksgiving would be on the third Thursday in November. Congress approved that declaration two years later in 1941.

The celebration of thanksgiving has undergone many transitions. In short it is an expression of gratitude for survival of our early ancestors. Over the centuries, families have added family traditions and customs that honor what they hold most precious. As people come together at Thanksgiving strength and hope is found. Each generation brings purpose and significance to the richness of their heritage. At Thanksgiving our hearts are humbled and we reflect on the gifts of family, friends, and health.

Emilee Vaught 1/23/2015

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