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The Fare of the First Thanksgiving

Turkey, cranberry sauce, mashed potatoes, and pumpkin pie? These are some of the “traditional” Thanksgiving foods that often come to Americans’ minds while preparing their shopping list for their big November grocery run. Instead of looking to their local supermarket for ingredients, the Pilgrims turned their eyes to their own backyard and neighbors. The Pilgrims’ Native American friends lent a helping hand to the newcomers, showing them local resources and techniques they had perfected. The First Thanksgiving “menu” may have changed, but using food as a tool to unite people remains.

While there is speculation as to the exact food served at the First Thanksgiving, a general menu has been surmised. The main meats would have included venison and wild fowl, such as ducks, geese, and turkeys (Olsen 6). The smaller birds would have likely been spit-roasted, and the larger birds boiled (Gambino). With the feast occurring over a three day span it is believed that the birds would have been roasted at the beginning and then the subsequent remains used for a broth that thickened and was served on the following days (Gambino). Stuffing also may have been served at the First Thanksgiving, however, it is unlikely that the recipe would have contained the modern ingredient of bread. Instead, herbs and onions would have been used, or in the more English version, oats (“Partakers”). What were called “herbs” included, but were not limited to, parsnips, collards, carrots, turnips, spinach, and cabbages (“Partakers”). Other offerings could have consisted of fish, lobsters, mussels, scallops, clams, beans, squash, pumpkin, crab apples, wild grapes, and nuts (Olsen 6). When one sees pumpkin on this list they might think, *I knew the First Thanksgiving would have pumpkin pie*. However, these assumptions would prove false. The current version of pumpkin pie was still generations away from creation and the earlier version of pumpkin pie, which treated pumpkins as one would apples by slicing them, was recorded years after the First Thanksgiving (“Partakers”).

This food was collectively provided for by both the Pilgrims and the Wampanoag. Edward Winslow, a Pilgrim leader, recorded, “they [the Wampanoag] went out and killed five Deer, which they brought to the Plantation and bestowed on our Governor, and upon the Captain and others.” In addition, the Pilgrims went “fowling” and collected berries (Olsen 5). The Wampanoag’s favored colorful hard flint corn, referred to by the Pilgrims as *Indian corn*, also would have made an appearance at the First Thanksgiving. This corn would later become a staple ingredient in traditional English meals like porridge, pancakes, and bread (“Partakers”).

The Pilgrims of Plymouth Plantation relied heavily on the aid provided to them from the Wampanoag, primarily Squanto. Without the Natives, the plentiful harvest that prompted the First Thanksgiving would have been unlikely. Squanto instructed the Pilgrims on gardening methods, such as growing corn, using fish as a fertilizer, and the differences between poisonous

plants and ones used for medicinal purposes (Olsen 5). With improved agricultural results, the Pilgrims were able to set aside food that would later be served at the First Thanksgiving.

At this time of early colonization food was scarce. With relatively limited knowledge of the region, hunting and gathering was challenging for the Pilgrims. Food was considered an important commodity, making the Pilgrims' sharing of their own food truly symbolic of friendship and goodwill. This harvest represented a unification of cultures and a time of bonding. The subsequent year's yield suffered from this splurging and sharing of food at the First Thanksgiving and as a result the Pilgrims had a low food supply. This sacrifice shows the depth of the Pilgrims' feelings.

The fare of the First Thanksgiving was a means for the Pilgrims and Wampanoags to better understand each other and their cultures. Through food, traditions are passed on and new ones are created. Both parties at the First Thanksgiving learned from one another, allowing them to have more respect and appreciation for the others' ways of life. Sharing food is a cornerstone for hospitality. Edward Winslow's last remark of the First Thanksgiving shares this sentiment: "And although it be not always so plentiful, as it was at this time with us, yet by the goodness of God, we are so far from want, that we often wish you partakers of our plenty." Food as a means to unify people has transcended the First Thanksgiving, when it brought the Pilgrims and Wampanoag together, continually uniting families and friends the fourth Thursday of every November.

Work Cited

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