

Jessica Veenstra

Missouri Mayflower Scholarship Essay

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“The Fare of the First Thanksgiving”

The brisk fall morning was warmed by the excitement in the air for what was sure to be the first of several of the most exciting days the colonists from the *Mayflower* had spent in the New World so far. It seemed that the whole colony was alive and awake, from the children racing excitedly about, to the adults beginning last minute preparations, to the fires dancing merrily in their hearths below a meal that was already in the early stages of preparation.

It had been more than a year since the colonists had boarded the *Mayflower* in search of the New World and the freedoms, wealth, and adventure it potentially had to offer. They had arrived at the site where they would build Plymouth colony in the harsh New England winter. The colonists did not have adequate shelter or food supplies for such conditions, and many were laid to rest that first winter. Despite this tragedy, those who remained had much to be thankful for. In less than a year, they had developed friendships and alliances with the nearby Wampanoag Native American tribe led by Chief Massasoit. They had befriended Squanto, or Tisquantum, an English-speaking Patuxet Wampanoag who taught the colonists how to be self-sufficient with the resources and terrain around them (“The Pilgrims”). They had built additional sturdier shelters and had brought in a bountiful harvest. A repeat of that first terrible winter seemed impossible – a celebration was in order.

For this special occasion, a mediocre or average smorgasbord of food would not do. First and foremost, a great amount of meat was to be included in the feasting. Four of the men had

brought back a great number of fowl from their hunt (a variety of waterfowl, turkeys, and pigeons were all abundant in the region). Seasoned with harvested vegetables or foraged herbs and nuts, the meat was cooked over open fires and boiled in large cauldrons. In days succeeding the first day of feasting, the remaining meat scraps could be boiled with other ingredients to create stews and porridges. The Indian corn the colonists had been taught to grow would also play an important role in the meals. The corn had been dried and finely ground after harvest, and now it could be used as a thickening agent in porridges or as a substitute for flour in breads. Other vegetables they had grown in their gardens would also be present on the tables, adding a variety of colors to the plates. The rich New England soil had supported beans, pumpkins, squash, turnips, carrots, and more. As Plymouth had been built in close proximity to the coast, a variety of seafood could additionally be included in the feasting. The coastal waters teemed with many varieties of fish, eels, shellfish, lobsters, mussels, and clams (Gambino).

The fifty-two inhabitants of Plymouth would not be the only ones to take part in this feasting and giving of thanks, nor would they be the only ones contributing to the fare. Chief Massasoit, along with ninety Wampanoag braves, would add to the merriment and prominence of the special occasion. They would remain at Plymouth for three days. Chief Massasoit would send his men out on a hunt, and they would return with five deer, which would be presented as gifts to important men in the colony (Armstrong). The venison could be roasted over large open fires and included in the feasting along with all of the other food. Side by side, the European colonists and the Native Americans would give thanks for their health, the harvests they had reaped, the meat they had secured, and the alliance they had built with each other.

This may not be exactly what occurred at the first Thanksgiving (as limited information is available). However, this essay is based around the firsthand accounts that do exist, followed by

later accounts of the colonists on what life and diet in the colony were like, and lastly on evidence and speculation of what foods and resources were available to the colonists in 1621. Despite the limited amount of information we have, we are still able to form reasonable assumptions of what this important and historical event was like. Above all else, we can look back on and remember the brave colonists who came to the New World on the *Mayflower* and gave thanks for the blessings they had received.

Works Cited

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