

The origins of turkey day

A few hundred years ago, a group of New Englanders got together and celebrated the blessings of a bountiful harvest and plentiful game by declaring a holiday and throwing a feast. They invited their neighbors, the local tribe of Indians, and had a three-day party to commemorate their first wonderful year in the New World. Sounds good, but the story isn't even close to the truth. The historians probably had honorable intent, but their imaginings did little more than cover up the facts about our bungling ancestors with a nice tale about the New England Puritans, Pilgrims and a celebration that they didn't call Thanksgiving.

We can start with the landing of the Mayflower and the Pilgrims at Plymouth Rock, near the top of Cape Cod Bay. They actually planned to settle in Virginia, but not the state of Virginia, as we know it today. In 1620, the Virginia Company issued the first Pierce Patent to the Company of Merchant Adventurers, giving them permission to start a new settlement that would be inhabited by the Pilgrims in the Virginia territory. The Pilgrims bought stock in the patent, which gave them rights to settle in the territory for seven years. The area was in the Hudson River region of New York, not Cape Cod.

The reasons for landing at Plymouth have been obfuscated by the historians because they probably did not want to portray our forefathers as the inept mariners that they were. Due partly to bad weather, certainly incompetent navigation, and a ship that was lucky to stay afloat in anything stronger than a stiff breeze, they got lost and never did find the Hudson River.

The first few months in America proved hard on the Pilgrims. Half of their 102 members perished. Of the 17 male heads of families, 10 died of an infectious disease. Of the 17 wives, only three remained after three months. The devastation was so dramatic that the following summer, when conditions improved, William Bradford wrote of "all things in good plenty," making the sincerity of "Thanksgiving"



You can't beat a system you can't understand

By Sam Bari

apparent.

After the all-consuming illness, everyday survival was most likely perceived as cause for gratitude. However, when given a full and prosperous harvest with the help and instruction of their native hosts such as Squanto, a native of the Patuxet tribe that lived at present-day Plymouth, their observance of the previous ordeal could be understood as a trial by God, a test of faith, the heavenly reward prefigured by an earthly one.

The initial landing party at Plymouth is also interesting. According to William Bradford, some time after their arrival, the Pilgrim men led by Captain Miles Standish, fired shots into the darkness at "a hideous and great cry." Apparently, they mistook the cries for a "company of wolves, or such like wild beasts." The next morning when arrows came flying at them by the hundreds, their assumptions changed. Instead of introducing themselves and offering good will by treating the natives with even the smallest modicum of respect, they shot at them. Needless to say, this was not well received.

There are only two recognized accounts that more or less chronicle the events and activities of the Pilgrims and the first Thanksgiving taking place in 1621. The first was written by Edward Winslow in a letter dated Dec. 12, 1621. The second, was written about 20 years after the fact by William Bradford in his "History of Plymouth Plantation." Bradford's "History" was rediscovered in 1854 after having been taken by British looters during the Revolutionary War. The accounts contradicted one another in many areas, and the difference between fact and fiction is diffi-

cult to ascertain. Much depends on whom you want to believe.

Anyway, Squanto, a local native who had been to England and could communicate well with the colonists, taught them how to plant corn, where to catch fish, and how to procure other commodities, was seen by the Pilgrims as a special instrument sent of God for their good beyond their expectations.

The recognized peace treaty with the natives was made with a chief by the name of Massasoit. The treaty was initiated not by the Pilgrims but by the sachem himself, who had already made an equivalent pact with earlier explorers. The success of the treaty during Massasoit's lifetime suggests an equality, fairness, and tolerance that was later idealized in various remembrances of the overall colonial experience. It allowed both the positive example of the 'Indian' in Massasoit, and reassurance of European good faith in dealing with him.

Despite the less than auspicious beginning, the first celebration of the harvest happened courtesy of the invited native guests to the celebration. They brought venison, ducks, geese, fish, and introduced wild turkey to the Pilgrims. About 90 natives from nearby tribes arrived at the celebration and the party lasted for three days. The guests greatly outnumbered the Pilgrims.

Nonetheless, it was not called Thanksgiving. That word was reserved for a religious service to give thanks for a particular event, like surviving a battle. The celebration as enjoyed by the Pilgrims and the American Natives included secular songs and dances performed by non-Christians who would never be included in a formal Christian ceremony.

The first celebration of harvest was a one-time affair that was never repeated. Thanksgiving as we know it was reinvented over two centuries later, and through political manipulation evolved into the holiday it is today. Even Thanksgiving is part of that system we just can't seem to understand.

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