

Deconstructing the Myths of “The First Thanksgiving”

by Judy Dow (Abenaki)

What is it about the story of “The First Thanksgiving” that makes it essential to be taught in virtually every grade from preschool through high school? What is it about the story that is so seductive? Why has it become an annual elementary school tradition to hold Thanksgiving pageants, with young children dressing up in paper-bag costumes and feather-duster headdresses and marching around the schoolyard? Why is it seen as necessary for fake “pilgrims” and fake “Indians” (portrayed by real children, many of whom are Indian) to sit down every year to a fake feast, acting out fake scenarios and reciting fake dialogue about friendship? And why do teachers all over the country continue (for the most part, unknowingly) to perpetuate this myth year after year after year?

Is it because as Americans we have a deep need to believe that the soil we live on and the country on which it is based was founded on integrity and cooperation? This belief would help contradict any feelings of guilt that could haunt us when we look at our role in more recent history in dealing with other indigenous peoples in other countries. If we dare to give up the “myth” we may have to take responsibility for our actions both concerning indigenous peoples of this land as well as those brought to this land in violation of everything that makes us human. The realization of these truths untold might crumble the foundation of what many believe is a true democracy. As good people, can we be strong enough to learn the truths of our collective past? Can we learn from our mistakes? This would be our hope.

We offer these myths and facts to assist students, parents and teachers in thinking critically about this holiday, and deconstructing what we have been taught about the history of this continent and the world. (Note: We have based our “fact” sections in large part on the research, both published and unpublished, that Abenaki scholar Margaret M. Bruchac developed in collaboration with the Wampanoag Indian Program at Plimoth Plantation. We thank Marge for her generosity. We thank Doris Seale and Lakota Harden for their support.)

Myth #1: “The First Thanksgiving” occurred in 1621.

Fact: No one knows when the “first” thanksgiving occurred. People have been giving thanks for as long as people have existed. Indigenous nations all over the world have celebrations of the harvest that come from very old traditions; for Native peoples, thanksgiving comes not once a year, but every day, for all the gifts of life. To refer to the harvest feast of 1621 as “The First Thanksgiving” disappears Indian peoples in the eyes of non-Native children.

Myth #2: The people who came across the ocean on the Mayflower were called Pilgrims.

Fact: The Plimoth settlers did not refer to themselves as “Pilgrims.” Pilgrims are people who travel for religious reasons, such as Muslims who make a pilgrimage to Mecca. Most of those who arrived here from England were religious dissidents who had broken away from the Church of England. They called themselves “Saints”; others called them “Separatists.” Some of the settlers were “Puritans,” dissidents but not separatists who wanted to “purify” the Church. It wasn’t until around the time of the American Revolution that the name “Pilgrims” came to be associated with the Plimoth settlers, and the “Pilgrims” became the symbol of American morality and Christian faith, fortitude, and family. (1)

Myth #3: The colonists came seeking freedom of religion in a new land.

Fact: The colonists were not just innocent refugees from religious persecution. By 1620, hundreds of Native people had already been to England and back, most as captives; so the Plimoth colonists knew full well that the land they were settling on was inhabited. Nevertheless, their belief system taught them that any land that was “unimproved” was “wild” and theirs for the taking; that the people who lived there were roving heathens with no right to the land. Both the Separatists and Puritans were rigid fundamentalists who came here fully intending to take the land away from its Native inhabitants and establish a new nation, their “Holy Kingdom.” The Plimoth colonists were never concerned with “freedom of religion” for anyone but themselves. (2)

Myth #4: When the “Pilgrims” landed, they first stepped foot on “Plymouth Rock.”

Fact: When the colonists landed, they sought out a sandy inlet in which to beach the little shallop that carried them from the Mayflower to the mainland. This shallop would have been smashed to smithereens had they docked at a rock, especially a Rock. Although the Plimoth settlers built their homes just up the hill from the Rock, William Bradford in Mourt’s Relation: A Journal of the Pilgrims at Plymouth, does not even mention the Rock; writing only that they “unshipped our shallop and drew her on land.” (3) The actual “rock” is a slab of Dedham granodiorite placed there by a receding glacier some 20,000 years ago. It was first referred to in a town surveying record in 1715, almost 100 years after the landing. Since then, the Rock has been moved, cracked in two, pasted together, carved up, chipped apart by tourists, cracked again, and now rests as a memorial to something that never happened. (4)

It's quite possible that the myth about the "Pilgrims" landing on a "Rock" originated as a reference to the New Testament of the Christian bible, in which Jesus says to Peter, "And I say also unto thee, Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my Church and the Gates of Hell shall not prevail against it." (Matthew 16:18) The appeal to these scriptures gives credence to the sanctity of colonization and the divine destiny of the dominant culture. Although the colonists were not dominant then, they behaved as though they were.

Myth #5: The Pilgrims found corn.

Fact: Just a few days after landing, a party of about 16 settlers led by Captain Myles Standish followed a Nauset trail and came upon an iron kettle and a cache of Indian corn buried in the sand. They made off with the corn and returned a few days later with reinforcements. This larger group "found" a larger store of corn, about ten bushels, and took it. They also "found" several graves, and, according to Mourt's Relation, "brought sundry of the prettiest things away" from a child's grave and then covered up the corpse. They also "found" two Indian dwellings and "some of the best things we took away with us." (5) There is no record that restitution was ever made for the stolen corn, and the Wampanoag did not soon forget the colonists' ransacking of Indian graves, including that of Massasoit's mother. (6)

Myth #6: Samoset appeared out of nowhere, and along with Squanto became friends with the Pilgrims. Squanto helped the Pilgrims survive and joined them at "The First Thanksgiving."

Fact: Samoset, an eastern Abenaki chief, was the first to contact the Plimoth colonists. He was investigating the settlement to gather information and report to Massasoit, the head sachem in the Wampanoag territory. In his hand, Samoset carried two arrows: one blunt and one pointed. The question to the settlers was: are you friend or foe? Samoset brought Tisquantum (Squanto), one of the few survivors of the original Wampanoag village of Pawtuxet, to meet the English and keep an eye on them. Tisquantum had been taken captive by English captains several years earlier, and both he and Samoset spoke English. Tisquantum agreed to live among the colonists and serve as a translator. Massasoit also sent Hobbamock and his family to live near the colony to keep an eye on the settlement and also to watch Tisquantum, whom Massasoit did not trust. The Wampanoag oral tradition says that Massasoit ordered Tisquantum killed after he tried to stir up the English against the Wampanoag. Massasoit himself lost face after his years of dealing with the English only led to warfare and land grabs. Tisquantum is viewed by Wampanoag people as a traitor, for his scheming against other Native people for his own gain. Massasoit is viewed as a wise and generous leader whose affection for the English may have led him to be too tolerant of their ways. (7)

Myth #7: The Pilgrims invited the Indians to celebrate the First Thanksgiving.

Fact: According to oral accounts from the Wampanoag people, when the Native people nearby first heard the gunshots of the hunting colonists, they thought that the colonists were preparing for war and that Massasoit needed to be informed. When Massasoit showed up with 90 men and no women or children, it can be assumed that he was being cautious. When he saw there was a party going on, his men then went out and brought back five deer and lots of turkeys. (8)

In addition, both the Wampanoag and the English settlers were long familiar with harvest celebrations. Long before the Europeans set foot on these shores, Native peoples gave thanks every day for all the gifts of life, and held thanksgiving celebrations and giveaways at certain times of the year. The Europeans also had days of thanksgiving, marked by religious services. So the coming together of two peoples to share food and company was not entirely a foreign thing for either. But the visit that by all accounts lasted three days was most likely one of a series of political meetings to discuss and secure a military alliance. Neither side totally trusted the other: The Europeans considered the Wampanoag soulless heathens and instruments of the devil, and the Wampanoag had seen the Europeans steal their seed corn and rob their graves. In any event, neither the Wampanoag nor the Europeans referred to this feast/meeting as “Thanksgiving.” (9)

Myth #8: The Pilgrims provided the food for their Indian friends.

Fact: It is known that when Massasoit showed up with 90 men and saw there was a party going on, they then went out and brought back five deer and lots of turkeys. Though the details of this event have become clouded in secular mythology, judging by the inability of the settlers to provide for themselves at this time and Edward Winslow’s letter of 1622 (10), it is most likely that Massasoit and his people provided most of the food for this “historic” meal. (11)

Myth #9: The Pilgrims and Indians feasted on turkey, potatoes, berries, cranberry sauce, pumpkin pie, and popcorn.

Fact: Both written and oral evidence show that what was actually consumed at the harvest festival in 1621 included venison (since Massasoit and his people brought five deer), wild fowl, and quite possibly nasaump—dried corn pounded and boiled into a thick porridge, and pompion—cooked,

mashed pumpkin. Among the other food that would have been available, fresh fruits such as plums, grapes, berries and melons would have been out of season. It would have been too cold to dig for clams or fish for eels or small fish. There were no boats to fish for lobsters in rough water that was about 60 fathoms deep. There was not enough of the barley crop to make a batch of beer, nor was there a wheat crop. Potatoes and sweet potatoes didn't get from the south up to New England until the 18th century, nor did sweet corn. Cranberries would have been too tart to eat without sugar to sweeten them, and that's probably why they wouldn't have had pumpkin pie, either. Since the corn of the time could not be successfully popped, there was no popcorn. (12)

Myth #10: The Pilgrims and Indians became great friends.

Fact: A mere generation later, the balance of power had shifted so enormously and the theft of land by the European settlers had become so egregious that the Wampanoag were forced into battle. In 1637, English soldiers massacred some 700 Pequot men, women and children at Mystic Fort, burning many of them alive in their homes and shooting those who fled. The colony of Connecticut and Massachusetts Bay Colony observed a day of thanksgiving commemorating the massacre. By 1675, there were some 50,000 colonists in the place they had named "New England." That year, Metacom, a son of Massasoit, one of the first whose generosity had saved the lives of the starving settlers, led a rebellion against them. By the end of the conflict known as "King Philip's War," most of the Indian peoples of the Northeast region had been either completely wiped out, sold into slavery, or had fled for safety into Canada. Shortly after Metacom's death, Plimoth Colony declared a day of thanksgiving for the English victory over the Indians. (13)

Myth #11: Thanksgiving is a happy time.

Fact: For many Indian people, "Thanksgiving" is a time of mourning, of remembering how a gift of generosity was rewarded by theft of land and seed corn, extermination of many from disease and gun, and near total destruction of many more from forced assimilation. As currently celebrated in this country, "Thanksgiving" is a bitter reminder of 500 years of betrayal returned for friendship.

References/Recommended Books

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- Hunter, Sally M. (Ojibwe), *Four Seasons of Corn: A Winnebago Tradition*. Minneapolis: Lerner Publications, 1997, grades 4-6.
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- Seale, Doris (Santee/Cree), Beverly Slapin, and Carolyn Silverman (Cherokee), eds., *Thanksgiving: A Native Perspective*. Berkeley: Oyate, 1998, teacher resource.
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References/Primary Sources

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- Council on Interracial Books for Children, *Chronicles of American Indian Protest*. New York: CIBC, 1971.
- Winslow, Edward, *Good Newes from New England: A True Relation of Things Very Remarkable at the Plantation of Plimoth in New England*, first published in 1624. Bedford, Mass.: Applewood Books, n.d.

Notes

- (1) Correspondence with Abenaki scholar Margaret M. Bruchac. See also Plimoth Plantation, "A Key to Historical and Museum Terms," www.plimoth.org/education/field_trips/ft-terms.htm; "Who Were the Pilgrims?" www.plimoth.org/library/whowere.htm.
- (2) See Note 1.
- (3) See William Bradford's *Mourt's Relation: A Journal of the Pilgrims at Plymouth*, p. 19.

- (4) Conversation with Douglas Frink, Archaeology Consulting Team, Inc. See also Plimoth Plantation, "The Adventures of Plimoth Rock," www.plimoth.org/library/plymrock.htm.
- (5) See William Bradford's *Mourt's Relation: A Journal of the Pilgrims at Plymouth*, p. 28.
- (6) Correspondence with Margaret M. Bruchac. See also "The Saints Come Sailing In," in Dorothy W. Davids and Ruth A. Gudinas, "Thanksgiving: A New Perspective (and its Implications in the Classroom)" in *Thanksgiving: A Native Perspective*, pp. 70-71.
- (7) Correspondence with Margaret M. Bruchac about the relationship Samoset, Tisquantum, Hobbamock, and Massasoit. See also Margaret M. Bruchac and Catherine O'Neill Grace, *1621: A New Look at Thanksgiving*.
- (8) See Margaret M. Bruchac and Catherine O'Neill Grace, *ibid.*
- (9) For a description of how the European settlers regarded the Wampanoag, as well as evidence of their theft of seed corn and funerary objects, see *Mourt's Relation*. See also Margaret M. Bruchac and Catherine O'Neill Grace, *ibid.*
- (10) See Edward Winslow, *Good Newes from New England: A True Relation of Things Very Remarkable at the Plantation of Plimoth in New England*.
- (11) See Duane Champagne, *Native America: Portrait of the Peoples*. Detroit: Visible Ink (1994), pp. 81-82; and Chuck Larsen, *op. cit.*, p. 51.
- (12) See Plimoth Plantation, "No Popcorn!," www.plimoth.org/library/thanksgiving/nopopc.htm, and "A First Thanksgiving Dinner for Today," www.plimoth.org/library/thanksgiving/afirst.htm. See also Margaret M. Bruchac and Catherine O'Neill Grace, *op. cit.*
- (13) See "King Philip Cries Out for Revenge," pp. 43-45; and "There Are Many Thanksgiving Stories to Tell," pp. 49-52, in *Thanksgiving: A Native Perspective*. See also Margaret M. Bruchac and Catherine O'Neill Grace, *op. cit.*