The History of Thanksgiving

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**The Pilgrims and their Journey**

Attempting to bring the term “Pilgrim” to one single classification of people would be a difficult feat to accomplish. Generally, the Pilgrims we know today refers to the group of passengers that arrived in America in the early 1620s aboard four separate ships, the *Mayflower,* the *Fortune,* the *Anne,* and the *Little James.* Their reasons for leaving England to ascend to America primarily dealt with their separation from the Church of England; however, separatist, which they were eventually classified as, and nonsepartist all took part in the journey to America (Who Were the Pilgrims, 2005).

In 1606 a small group of rebels against the Church of England began to congregate in a village known as Scrooby; however, because of their rebellion towards the Church of England, they were under constant fear of being imprisoned or worse (Why the Pilgrim Fathers left England, 1998). Due to the risk of imprisonment, in 1608 the renegades decided to flee to Holland (Religion, 2005). Finally, in 1620, 102 fleeing Pilgrims left England heading towards America (Why the Pilgrim Fathers left England, 1998).

The first of the ships to begin their journey to America was in July of 1620 and was called the *Mayflower* (*Mayflower* and the Mayflower Compact, 2011). Originally the *Mayflower* and the *Speedwell* were both scheduled to set sail to America; however, due to issues with the *Speedwell,* the *Mayflower* ended up making the journey alone (Voyage of the *Mayflower* and the *Speedwell,* 2005). Therefore, upon setting sail in July, the *Mayflower* had to turn around two times due to problems with the ship. Because of these problems, the actual depart date ended up being pushed back until September of 1620. Even though there were many risks associated with sailing across the Atlantic in the 1600s, the *Mayflower* was able to make it safely to America, only losing one passenger along the way. The Pilgrims traveled the stormy Atlantic for 66 days before arriving on November 11, 1620 in Cape Cod. After a couple of weeks there, the Pilgrims took refuge in Plymouth, Massachusetts. Due to the harsh winter conditions, the Pilgrims worked on land building their plantation during the day, but had to return to the *Mayflower* at dark to take shelter. The first winter placed strains on the Pilgrims because around half of the passengers died during the severe weather. At last, the Pilgrims were able to settle on their plantation in March of the following year. (*Mayflower* and the Mayflower Compact, 2011).

On arriving in America the new settlers needed a new agreement in order to settle in New England. Because the Pilgrims chose to settle above their original location, they needed a new patent from the Church of England. Later called the *Mayflower Compact* (in 1793), this new agreement helped to uphold the order in the new settlement until the settlers received the new official documents from the Church of England. The agreement was signed by the males that were aboard the *Mayflower* (*Mayflower* and the Mayflower Compact, 2011).

**The Wampanoag Indians**

The Wampanoag Indians are a tribe of Native American Indians initially from the states of Massachusetts and Rhode Island (Native American Facts for Kids, 2011). In the 1600s the Wampanoag tribe had a population of around 12,000 people, extending along the New England area with 40 different tribal villages. Among the years of 1614 to 1620 there were 3 tragic epidemics that struck the Wampanoag tribe harshly causing many deaths. Many of the villages saw their populations become extinct, and around the time of the *Mayflower’s* arrival the population of the tribe was down to less than 2,000 members. These numbers continued to decrease with the arrival of the Pilgrims and the other European settlers in the colony regions and the diseases that they brought that the Native Americans were not immune to. For survival, the Wampanoag Indians relied on the horticulture they cultivated and the game they hunted (Sultzman, L., n.d.). They would eat something that they referred to as the “The Sisters” which encompassed “maize, beans, and squash” (Wampanoag Indians, 2011, para. 2). During the summer months they lived closer to the coast to benefit from the fishing in the Cape Cod area; however, once summer was over the Indians would move offshore to hunt wild game (Sultzman, L., n.d.). The Wampanoag’s had their own language that they spoke that has later been termed “Massachusett or Natick” (Wampanoag Indians, 2011, para. 2).

**How the Pilgrims and Wampanoag Indians Interacted**

When the Pilgrims first landed at Plymouth, it was not the Native American people’s first encounter with the Europeans. Since the 16th century the Europeans would come to America and fish along the coast of New England, which caused them to, at times, come in contact with one another. By colonizing the land, that Europeans felt as though they were benefiting the Native Americans because they could help to improve the farming land by using the traditions they used in Europe and could introduce Christianity to the Native Americans, as a way to convert them to their religion of Christianity (Native People and European Contact, 2005).

Because of the harsh conditions that first winter, the Pilgrims population decreased by almost half. These issues left the Pilgrims at a high risk of not being able to defend themselves in the event of an attack by the Native American villages because they were so weak (Cline, D.A., 2006). However, on March 1, 1621 a Native American named Samoset walked into the Pilgrims plantation and greeted the Pilgrims in English, which he had learned from the Europeans who had fished off the coast for many years. Later Samoset introduced Squanto to the Pilgrims (Politics and Coexistence, 2005). Squanto spoke English very well, which was a surprise to many of the Pilgrims because of his Native American background. He was extremely helpful to the Pilgrims because he taught them how to fish for herring off the coast and how to cultivate the land to plant the crops that the Native Americans grew (Cline, D.A., 2006).

Around the time of late March and early April Samoset and Squanto informed the Indians that their chief, the Massasoit, and many of his men were there to organize a treaty. A Peace Treaty was made between the Pilgrims and the Native Americans as a way to reassure peace within the two different villages of people. The relations of the Pilgrims and the Native Americans benefited from this treaty because it allowed them to help one another (Cline, D.A., 2006).

**The Origins of the First Thanksgiving**

After the Peace Treaty had been signed and enforced within the Pilgrims plantation, the Native Americans worked with the Pilgrims to help cultivate the land (Cline, D.A., 2006). The Native Americans helped to teach the Pilgrims how to grow various crops such as beans, pumpkin, and corn (Origin of Thanksgiving Day, 2010). In October of 1621 the first Thanksgiving was celebrated with both the Pilgrims and the Native Americans. The celebration included the food that had been jointly cultivated between the Pilgrims and the Native Americans, and games that were played as part of the celebration (Cline, D.A., 2006). The purpose of the celebration was to give thanks to God for bringing a successful harvest to the plantation; however, the Pilgrims did not actually call the celebration “Thanksgiving” (The First Thanksgiving at Plymouth, 2005). It is believed that at the first celebration the food that was served included “venison, duck, turkey, corn, and pumpkin” (Cline, D.A., 2006, para. 145).

**The First Celebrated Thanksgiving Holiday**

“The religious day of thanksgiving and the harvest festival evolved into a single event: a yearly Thanksgiving, proclaimed by individual governors for a Thursday in November” (The First Thanksgiving, 2005, para. 4). When George Washington was in office, he affirmed that a day of Thanksgiving would be in place on November 26, 1789; however, this was not considered a holiday that would be celebrated annually. Many presidents like George Washington would enforce a day of Thanksgiving, but it was not until Lincoln was in office that the first national holiday was declared. Originally, the national holiday was set in place for the last Thursday of November as a way to give thanks, which is believed to have been set on this day, by Lincoln, as a way to link the date with the time when Pilgrims landed in Plymouth. In 1939 the Thanksgiving that we celebrate today was declared by Franklin D. Roosevelt. Roosevelt decided that the fourth Thursday of November would be a better date for the national holiday compared to Lincoln’s original idea (How Thanksgiving Became a Holiday, n.d.).

**How We Celebrate Thanksgiving Today**

Many years after the national holiday of Thanksgiving was put in place, we still, as Americans, celebrate Thanksgiving on the fourth day of November every year. The traditions that are celebrated by Americans on Thanksgiving have many similarities, but also many differences. Many of the common traditions that are associated with Thanksgiving Day are traveling, the Thanksgiving meal, spending quality time with family and friends, and the various television shows. The main aspect of each of these individual traditions is spending time with people that we are close to and giving thanks for our blessings just as the original Thanksgiving Day back when the Pilgrims celebrated it (Thanksgiving Traditions, 2011).

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