Harvest Ceremony
Beyond the Thanksgiving Myth

Summary: Native American people who first encountered the "pilgrims" at what is now Plymouth, Massachusetts, play a major role in the imagination of American people today. Contemporary celebrations of the Thanksgiving holiday focus on the idea that the "first Thanksgiving" was a friendly gathering of two disparate groups—or even neighbors—who shared a meal and lived harmoniously. In actually, the assembly of these people had much more to do with political alliances, diplomacy, and an effort at rarely achieved, temporary peaceful coexistence. Although Native American people have always given thanks for the world around them, the Thanksgiving celebrated today is more a combination of Puritan religious practices and the European festival called Harvest Home, which then grew to encompass Native foods.

The First People

In 1620, the area from Narragansett Bay in eastern Rhode Island to the Atlantic Ocean in southeastern Massachusetts, including Cape Cod, Matha's Vineyard and Nantucket, was the home of the Wampanoag. Although culturally, politically, religiously, and economically similar to the Narragansett people to the west, Wampanoags did not speak the same language and considered Narragansett their traditional enemies.

The Wampanoag practiced agriculture and followed a seasonal round of gardening and fishing near the coast in spring and summer, moving to sheltered inland locations for hunting in the fall and winter. They cultivated several varieties of corn, beans, and squash. These were dried and stored in underground caches and—along with numerous wild vegetables, nuts, and fruits—traded to other groups for things they needed but did not produce themselves.

Wampanoag society was stratified and social position was inherited. Each village was headed by a leader called a sachem, who ruled by persuasion and by consent of the people. Ordinarily, the sachemship was passed down through the male line in "royal" families, but a woman could inherit the position if there was no male heir. A sachem could be usurped by someone belonging to a sachem family who was able to garner the allegiance of enough people. An unjust or unwise sachem could find himself with no one to lead, as sachems had no authority to force the people to do things. If people did not like their sachem, they were free to move and switch allegiances.

There were 69 autonomous villages within the Wampanoag Nation. The sachem of each village collected tribute (a gift or payment or other acknowledgement of gratitude, respect or admiration) from the people of his/her village. In 1620, one very influential sachem of the Wampanoag was a remarkable statesman named Massasoit.

Spiritual beliefs involved a reciprocal relationship with nature. Offerings in the form of food and precious objects, such a shell beads, were given back to the earth to express thankfulness and respect to supernatural beings. The Wampanoag people understood that one couldn't keep taking from the earth without giving something back. It has long been customary for horticultural

Indian people to have ceremonies in which they express their thanks for a bountiful harvest. The Wampanoag celebrated their harvest with a ceremony that combined feasting, dancing, and ceremonial games with a "give away" in which families gave away personal possessions to others in the community who were in need.

From 1616-17, three to four years before the European adventurers and religious refugees anchored the Mayflower in Cape Cod Bay, the Indians of southern New England had been decimated by diseases introduced by earlier European explorers. The effects of the diseases were particularly hard felt along the coast. Whole villages were wiped out; historians estimate that as many as three-fourths of the Wampanoags were killed. The entire population of the Wampanoag village of Patuxet was wiped out by a terrible plague. When Europeans founded Plimouth Plantation amid the ruins of Patuxet, they found the human bones littering the ground because there had been no one left to bury the dead.

The Immigrants

A majority of those who came to America on the Mayflower came to make a profit from the products of the land, and the rest were religious dissenters who fled their own country to escape religious intolerance. The little band of religious refugees and entrepreneurs that arrived on the Mayflower during December 1620 was poorly prepared to survive. They did not bring enough food, and they arrived too late to plant. They were not familiar with the area and lacked the knowledge, tools, and experience to effectively utilize the bounty of nature that surrounded them. For the first several months, two or three died each day from scurvy, lack of adequate shelter, and poor nutrition. On one exploration trip, the settlers found a storage pit and stole the corn that a Wampanoag family had set aside for the next season.

Contact

The Wampanoag were facing danger of a different kind. Their enemies, the Narragansett, who lived to the west, were hardly affected by the epidemic. They were now much more numerous than the Wampanoag, and the balance of power was tipping in their favor. The Wampanoag were undergoing pressure from the Narragansett, who were beginning to demand tribute from some Wampanoag villages.

The Wampanoag, seeking a military advantage, befriended the Europeans, who possessed formidable weapons with their muskets and fowling pieces (a light gun for shooting birds and small animals). Two Indian men who knew how to speak English made the initial advances. Samoset, an Abenaki from Maine, and Tisquantum, a Wampanoag, had both learned English as slaves in Europe. Tisquantum (called Squanto by the Europeans) was a Patuxet Wampanoag who had been kidnapped by Europeans and sold into slavery a few years before the epidemic that killed everyone in his village. After several years, he was able to find a ship that was coming back and returned home. When Tisquantum found his way to his village, he discovered he was the only living Patuxet left.

As the "starving time" of the European's first winter turned to spring, Tisquantum began to teach the settlers how to survive, and he set up a meeting between Massasoit and the first Governor of Plimouth, John Carver. Massasoit then negotiated a peace treaty with the newcomers in which they pledged to maintain friendly relations and to come to each other's aid in case of outside attack, among other things.

The summer passed and Tisquantum helped the newcomers learn to plant and care for native crops, to hunt and fish, and to do all the things necessary to partake of the natural abundance of the earth in this particular place.

The Harvest Celebration

As a result of the help the Europeans received from their new allies, they overcame their inexperience and—by the falloff their first year in Wampanoag country, 1621—they achieved a successful harvest. They planted their fields with a mixture of European seeds and corn given to them by Massasoit. Their foreign seeds did not do well, but the corn crop saved them. They decided to celebrate their success with a harvest festival called the Harvest Home which they most likely had celebrated as children in Europe. The Harvest Home consisted of non-stop feasting and drinking, sporting events, and parading in the fields shooting off muskets. This is the celebration that Edward Winslow relates in his letter of December 11, 1621. This letter is the principle surviving written record specifically describing the events of the "First Thanksgiving:"

"Our harvest being gotten in, our Governor sent four men on fowling, that so we might after a more special manner rejoice together; after we had gathered the fruits of our labours. They four in one day killed as much fowl as, with a little help beside, served the Company almost a week. At which time, amongst other recreations, we exercised our arms, many of the Indians coming amongst us, and amongst the rest their greatest king, Massasoit, with some 90 men, whom for three days we entertained and feasted. And they went out and killed five deer which they brought to the plantation and bestowed on our Governor and upon the Captain and others.(1)

Although there is nothing in this letter to suggest the giving of thanks, this is the celebration that has traditionally been associated with the contemporary Thanksgiving holiday. The "First Thanksgiving" was based on customs that the Europeans brought with them. Although traditional Wampanoag foods such as wild duck, goose, and turkey were part of the menu, the Indian contribution to the event was five deer which were roasted. The robust ale, made from the one successful English crop of barley, was the main non-Native food. In many ways this three-day feast symbolizes a rarely achieved relationship of peaceful coexistence between Indians and Europeans in the 17th Century.

(1) Mourt, George. A Journal of the Pilgrims at Plymouth: Mourt's Relation. New York: Corinth Books, 1963

Afterward

Although the peaceful relations established by Massasoit were often strained by dishonest, aggressive, and brutal actions on the part of the colonists, Massasoit kept his part of the treaty all his life. Upon his death in 1661, forty years after the landing of the first "boat people," the fragile peace began to deteriorate. In 1675, full-scale war erupted, ending with the defeat of the Wampanoag under Massasoit's son, Pometacom, called King Philip by the English. Though decimated by European diseases and defeated in war, the Wampanoag continued to survive through further colonization in the 18th, 19th, and 20th Centuries.

The Wampanoag Today

Today the three primary communities of Wampanoag people in Massachusetts are Mashpee on Cape Cod, Aquinnah (Gay Head) on Martha's Vineyard, and Herring Pond in south Plymouth. Aquinnah and Mashpee are both federally recognized tribes. Aquinnah having been so since 1987 and Mashpee since May 2007. The Wampanoag people live within their ancestral homelands and still largely sustain themselves as their ancestors did by hunting, fishing, gardening, and gathering. There are many fine artists who practice traditional basketry, wood carving, pottery, and wampum-making.

While there were several generations in which the Wampanoag language was not in use, the Wampanoag Language Reclamation Project has now been ongoing for the past 12 years. There is a steadily growing increase in fluency, and young children hearing it as a first language. Additionally, the Wampanoag maintain a rich and vital oral history and connection to the land. The Mashpee Wampanoag hold their annual powwow on the 4th of July weekend every year and the Aquinnah host their annual gathering in September.

Conclusion

Thanksgiving is a combination of Puritan religious practices and the European harvest festival, which now includes Native foods. It is still composed of a display of plenty, focused on an elaborate feast. Today's Thanksgiving football games are modern equivalent of the English Farmer's medieval harvest-time tradition of staging sporting events such as leaping, vaulting, and archery. The turkey shoot, which survives in some areas, has evolved from the medieval practice of "exercising arms."

Classroom Discussion Topics:

- The harvest celebration of 17th Century settlers at Plimouth presents a very different image from what we generally think of as the "First Thanksgiving" between Pilgrims and Indians. How far off is the modern story of Thanksgiving from what actually happened? What do you think about the idea of the "Thanksgiving myth" as a representation of what we celebrate today?
- Edward Winslow's 1621 letter states, ". . . many of the Indians coming amongst us, and amongst the rest their greatest king, Massasoit, with some 90 men. . .". Discuss the

possibility that the Wampanoag people were not initially extended an offer as guests to the harvest celebration, but showed up to investigate as the Europeans "exercised… arms" and ended up with an invitation to join. Why would it have been important for Massasoit to engage with the Europeans at that time?

- Think about the numerous different encounters between the Wampanoag people and Europeans—explorers, religious refugees (pilgrims), and entrepreneurs—in the 17th Century. While these encounters had various outcomes, both positive and negative, what are some of the reasons that parties from the two groups joined together during the harvest celebration in 1621? How did the "encounter" at that event impact their relationships with each other?
- Native American people around the country have different ways of approaching the idea of giving thanks. For example, there ae community feasts, seasonal celebrations, and give away ceremonies. Research some of the various methods of giving thanks among Native people in the region where you live. Why is giving thanks important to them? How do their ways of giving thanks impact your understanding of Native America people and the Thanksgiving holiday?