

Background Knowledge/Pre-reading for Educators:

The History of Thanksgiving:

“The Thanksgiving Day feast that is celebrated in the United States first took place over three days sometime between September 20 and November 9, 1621, among the settlers of Plymouth Colony (in Massachusetts) and approximately ninety Native people of the Wampanoag Nation. Contrary to popular myth, the Pilgrim/Wampanoag gathering was probably not the first public feast of thanksgiving held by the English in the “New World, but rather was one of the approximately three that had likely occurred since 1610, most notably at the Jamestown Colony. It is the Pilgrim/Wampanoag story of the “first” Thanksgiving, however, that has been passed down to generations of schoolchildren as a time-honored part of American history.

Perhaps the most enduring part of the first Thanksgiving myth is that the Pilgrims hosted the feast for the Native people present. The reality is that after a cautious approach on the part of the Wampanoag, both groups contributed to the feast. Without Wampanoag agricultural expertise, however, the English would not have survived to celebrate their first Thanksgiving. Unaccustomed to the extreme weather conditions of New England and without enough food, warm clothing, or other provisions to see them through the particularly harsh winter of 1620 - 1621, the Pilgrims had quickly become destitute and were on the verge of starvation. On the other hand, the Wampanoag people- members of one of the most powerful confederacies of Native nations of the time – had plenty of food, some of which the English stole to survive. It is both ironic and tragic that the Wampanoag Nation in the coming years would suffer an almost complete decimation of their once-enormous numbers, power, and influence – at the hands of the same people whose survival they had helped ensure.

In 1863, during the depths of the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln proclaimed that a day be set aside to give thanks publicly for life’s bounty. Today, Thanksgiving is a national holiday in both the United States and Canada (in the United States on the fourth Thursday in November, and in Canada on the second Monday in October)...

The idea of reserving just one day to give thanks for food, shelter, and the blessings of a healthy life is alien to many Native cultures, however. Most Indian people, even today, say that they give thanks each day for the bounty in their lives. It is customary for people in many Native cultures of the Western Hemisphere to greet each day with special prayers of thanksgiving to give thanks at various times, including at harvest festivals and ceremonies throughout the year.

On Thanksgiving Day, while most Native people are sitting down to turkey dinners, some prefer to observe the day as one of mourning – for what happened to the millions of Indians who lived on the North and South American continents before the arrival of the Europeans.”

*From **Do All Indians Live in Tipis?: Questions and Answers from the National Museum of the American Indian**, “Do Indians Celebrate Thanksgiving?,” Hill, Liz, p. 73-75, NMAI, 2018.*

Teacher Resources to Deepen Understanding:

- [“The Feast System” Dr. Willard Bill, Publication of the Office of Native Education, OSPI](#)
- American Indian Perspectives on Thanksgiving:
https://nmai.si.edu/sites/1/files/pdf/education/thanksgiving_poster.pdf
- Everyone’s history matters: [The Wampanoag Indian Thanksgiving story](#) deserves to be known:
- The Wampanog: A Thanksgiving Lesson:
<https://www.teachervision.com/wampanoag-thanksgiving-lesson>
- Wampanoag Tribe of Gay Head (Aquinnah): Unit on Corn, Beans and Squash:
http://wampanoag.virtualltownhall.net/Pages/Wampanoag_Education/corn?textPage=1
- [Harvest Ceremony: Beyond the Thanksgiving Myth, \(NMAI\)](#)
- Shana Brown – Essay--Essential Connections Between Food and Culture:
<http://nmai.si.edu/nk360/pnw-history-culture/#>