Native Americans

Before settlers came to the East Coast of the United States, the area was inhabited by many Native American tribes. The area surrounding the site of the first Thanksgiving, now known as southeastern Massachusetts and eastern Rhode Island had been the home of the Wampanoag people for over 12,000 years, and had been visited by other European settlers before the arrival of the Mayflower. The native people knew the land well and had fished, hunted, and harvested for thousands of generations.

The Settlers

In 1620, 101 people left Holland and sailed to the New World. They landed in Massachusetts and became the Plymouth Colony. The people of the Plymouth Colony were a group of English people who wanted to leave the Church of England. These 'separatists' initially moved to Holland and after 12 years of financial problems, they received funding from English merchants to sail across the Atlantic to settle in a 'New World.' A ship carrying 101 men, women, and children – the Mayflower - spent 66 days traveling the Atlantic Ocean, intending to land where New York City is now located. Due to the windy conditions, the group had to cut their trip short and settle at what is now called Cape Cod.

Settling and Exploring

As the Puritans prepared for winter, they collected anything they could find, including Wampanoag supplies.

One day, Samoset, a leader of the Abenaki tribe, and Tisquantum (better known as Squanto) visited the settlers. Squanto was a Wampanoag who had experience with other settlers and knew English. Squanto helped the settlers grow corn. After several meetings, a formal agreement was made between the settlers and the native people and they joined together to protect each other from other tribes in March of 1621.
The Celebration

One day that fall, four settlers were sent to hunt for food for a harvest celebration. The Wampanoag heard gunshots and alerted their leader, Massasoit, who thought the English might be preparing for war. Massasoit visited the English settlement with 90 of his men to see if the war rumor was true.

Soon after their visit, the Native Americans realized that the English were only hunting for the harvest celebration. Massasoit sent some of his own men to hunt deer for the feast and for three days, the English and native men, women, and children ate together. The meal consisted of deer, corn, shellfish, and roasted meat, very different from today’s traditional Thanksgiving feast.

Although prayers and thanks were probably offered at the 1621 harvest gathering, the first recorded religious Thanksgiving Day in Plymouth happened two years later in 1623. On this occasion, the colonists gave thanks to God for rain after a two-month drought.

Modern Thanksgiving

In the 19th century, the modern Thanksgiving holiday started to begin. In 1846, Sarah Josepha Hale, editor of a magazine called *Godley’s Lady’s Book*, campaigned for an annual national thanksgiving holiday after a passage about the harvest gathering of 1621 was discovered and incorrectly labeled as the first Thanksgiving.

It wasn’t until 1863, when President Abraham Lincoln declared two national Thanksgivings; one in August to commemorate the Battle of Gettysburg and the other in November to give thanks for "general blessings."
The Real Story of Thanksgiving

By Susan Bates, Manatanka American-Indian Council

Adapted from https://www.manataka.org/page269.html

Most of us associate Thanksgiving with happy Pilgrims and Indians sitting down to a big feast. And that did happen - once.

The real story begins in 1614 when a band of English explorers sailed home to England with a ship full of Patuxet Indians to be sold into slavery. The explorers left behind smallpox, which killed most of the Indians not captured. When the Pilgrims arrived in Massachusetts Bay, they found only one living Patuxet Indian, a man named Squanto who had survived slavery in England and knew how to speak English. He taught the Pilgrims how to grow corn and to fish, and helped make a peace treaty between the Pilgrims and the Wampanoag Nation. At the end of their first year, the Pilgrims held a great feast honoring Squanto and the Wampanoags.

But, as word spread in England about the paradise in the new world, many extremely religious people called Puritans began arriving. Finding no fences around the land, they considered it to be public. Joined by other British settlers, they captured land, captured strong young Natives for slaves and killing the rest. However, the Pequot Nation (another Indian tribe) had not agreed to the peace treaty Squanto had made and so they fought back. The Pequot War was one of the bloodiest Indian wars ever fought.

In 1637, in Connecticut, over 700 men, women and children of the Pequot Tribe had gathered for their annual "Green Corn Festival". Early in the morning, while the Indians were sleeping, they were surrounded by English and Dutch soldiers who ordered them to come outside. Those who came out were shot or beat to death while the terrified women and children who hid inside were burned alive. The next day the governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony declared "A Day Of Thanksgiving" because 700 unarmed men, women and children had been murdered.

Excited by their "victory", the brave colonists and their Indian allies attacked village after village. Women and children over 14 were sold into slavery while the rest were murdered. Boats loaded with as many as 500 slaves regularly left the ports of New England.

A second day of "thanksgiving" was announced to celebrate another attack. During the feasting, the heads of Natives were kicked through the streets like soccer balls. Even the friendly Wampanoag
did not escape the madness. Their chief was beheaded, and his head was put on a pole in Plymouth, Massachusetts -- where it remained on display for 24 years.

Later Abraham Lincoln decreed Thanksgiving Day to be a legal national holiday during the Civil War -- on the same day he ordered troops to march against the starving Sioux in Minnesota.

This story doesn't have quite the same fuzzy feelings associated with it as the one where the Indians and Pilgrims are all sitting down together at the big feast. But we need to learn the true history so it won't ever be repeated. On Thanksgiving, when you gather with your loved ones to Thank God for all your blessings, think about those people who only wanted to live their lives and raise their families. They, also took time out to say "thank you" to the Creator.
The Real Meaning of Thanksgiving: The Triumph Of Capitalism Over Collectivism

American Institute for Economic Research

Adapted from https://www.aier.org/research/real-meaning-thanksgiving-triumph-capitalism-over-collectivism

This time of the year, whether in good economic times or bad, is when we gather with our family and friends and enjoy a Thanksgiving meal together. It marks a remembrance of those early Pilgrim Fathers who crossed the uncharted ocean from Europe to make a new start in Plymouth, Massachusetts. What is less appreciated is that Thanksgiving also is a celebration of the birth of free enterprise in America.

The English Puritans, who left Great Britain and sailed across the Atlantic on the Mayflower in 1620, were not only escaping from religious persecution in their homeland. They also wanted to turn their back on what they viewed as the materialistic and greedy corruption of the Old World.

In the New World, they wanted to erect a New Jerusalem that would not only be religious, but be built on a new foundation of communal sharing. Their goal was the communism of Plato’s Republic, in which all would work and share in common without private property.

What resulted is recorded in the diary of Governor William Bradford, the head of the colony. The colonists collectively cleared and worked land, but they didn’t collect the large harvest they hoped for, nor did they create a spirit of shared and cheerful brotherhood.

Many people had been lazy and did not work hard in the fields. Knowing that they and their families were to receive an equal share of whatever the community produced, they saw little reason to work hard. The harder workers became angry that their efforts would be redistributed to the more lazy members of the colony. Soon they, too, were coming late to work and were less energetic in the fields.

Because of this, crops were light and the shares from the collective harvest were not enough to prevent starvation and death. Two years of communism had left alive only a small percentage of the original number of the Plymouth colonists.
Realizing that another season like this mean the end of the entire community, the elders of the colony decided to try something radically different: the introduction of private property rights and the right of the individual families to keep their own crops.

The Plymouth Colony experienced a great bounty of food. Private ownership meant that there was now a close link between work and reward. Industry became the order of the day as the men and women in each family went to the fields on their separate private farms. When the harvest time came, not only did many families produce enough for their own needs, but they had surpluses that they could freely exchange with their neighbors.

In the wilderness of the New World, the Plymouth Pilgrims had progressed from the false dream of communism to the realistic life of capitalism. At a time of economic uncertainty, it is important to recall this beginning of the American experiment and experience with freedom.

This is the lesson of the First Thanksgiving. This year, when we sit around our dining table with our family and friends, we should remember that what we are really celebrating is the birth of free men and free enterprise in that New World of America.

The real meaning of Thanksgiving, in other words, is the triumph of Capitalism over the failure of Collectivism in all its forms.