

2008

November



Celebrate Thanksgiving
November 27, 2008

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Trestleboard

The True Thanksgiving Story



by Dennis Rupert

It seems that every year we are treated to articles attempting to disprove the "myth of Thanksgiving." In these articles we are told that:

- the Pilgrims weren't the first people in America to hold a thanksgiving
- that the first thanksgiving had no religious significance at all, but was merely a harvest festival
- that our traditional Thanksgiving dinner has nothing in common with the Pilgrim's meal.

Some of these accusations are not a serious concern. After all, who cares if the Pilgrims served cranberries or not? But what seems to lie behind some of these articles is a desire to devalue the religious nature of our present Thanksgiving holiday. This is unfortunate since Thanksgiving is one of the few holidays on the America calendar that is not swept away with commercialism or mixed with pagan elements.

So here is "The True Thanksgiving Story." We have included references to primary sources which you can read for yourself. After reading I believe that you will still be able to eat your turkey with a happy stomach and a grateful heart to God.

Who observed the first Thanksgiving?

Okay, it wasn't the Pilgrims. Of course, native Americans celebrated many thanksgiving festivals before Europeans ever arrived in America. For example, the Wampanoag (Indian allies of the Pilgrims) held six thanksgiving festivals during the year.

The first recorded Christian thanksgiving in America occurred in Texas on May 23, 1541 when Spanish explorer, Francisco Vasquez de Coronado, and his men held a service of thanksgiving after finding food, water, and pasture for their animals in the Panhandle.

Another thanksgiving service occurred on June 30, 1564 when French Huguenot colonists celebrated in solemn praise and thanksgiving in a

settlement near what is now Jacksonville, Florida.

On August 9, 1607 English settlers led by Captain George Popham joined Abnaki Indians along Maine's Kennebec River for a harvest feast and prayer meeting. The colonists, living under the Plymouth Company charter, established Fort St. George around the same time as the founding of Virginia's Jamestown colony. Unlike Jamestown, however, this site was abandoned a year later.

Two years before the Pilgrims on December 4, 1619, a group of 38 English settlers arrived at Berkeley Plantation in what is now Charles City, Virginia. The group's charter required that the day of arrival be observed yearly as a day of thanksgiving to God. Captain John Woodleaf held the service of thanksgiving. Here is the section of the Charter of Berkeley Plantation which specifies the thanksgiving service:

"Wee ordaine that the day of our ships arrival at the place assigned for plantacon in the land of Virginia shall be yearly and perpetually kept holy as a day of thanksgiving to Almighty god."

In addition to 1619, the colonists perhaps held service in 1620 and 1621. The colony was wiped out in 1622. It was a private event, limited to the Berkeley settlement.

Thus Spanish, French and British colonists held several Thanksgiving services in America before the Pilgrim's celebration in 1621. Most of these early thanksgivings did not involve feasting. They were religious in nature, i.e. worship services of thankfulness to God.

What about the Pilgrim's Thanksgiving?

In a children's book called *The First Thanksgiving*, the author, Jean Craighead George says, the Pilgrims left Europe "to seek their fortune in the New World."¹ That would have come as news to the Pilgrims themselves. Pilgrim leader William Bradford wrote in his diary that the voyage was motivated by "a great hope for advancing the kingdom of Christ."

The Pilgrims set aground at Plymouth Rock on December 11, 1620. Their first winter was devastating. Weakened by the seven-week crossing and the need to establish housing, they came down with pneumonia and

consumption. They began to die -- one per day, then two, and sometimes three. They dug the graves at night, so that the Indians would not see how their numbers were dwindling. At one point, there were only seven persons able to fetch wood, make fires, and care for the sick. By the spring, they had lost 46 of the original 102 who sailed on the *Mayflower*.² The Pilgrims obviously needed help and it came from an English-speaking member of the Wampanoag nation, Squanto. Squanto decided to stay with the Pilgrims for the next few months and teach them how to survive. He brought them food and skins, taught them how to cultivate new vegetables and how to build Indian-style houses. He educated the Pilgrims on poisonous plants, medicine, how to get sap from the maple trees, use fish for fertilizer, and dozens of other skills needed for their survival.

The harvest of 1621 was a bountiful one and the remaining colonists decided to celebrate with a feast. The author of *The First Thanksgiving* states, "This was not a day of Pilgrim thanksgiving." Instead, she writes, "This was pure celebration."³ This is the type of subtle statement that often occurs in reading about the Pilgrim's first thanksgiving. It is not based on factual history, however. One can only guess at the motives of people who write such things, but statements like this appear to be motivated by a desire to rob the event of any religious meaning.

It is quite true that the word "thanksgiving" is not used in referring to the feast. Much is made of this by secular authors who attempt to reinterpret the Pilgrim thanksgiving. But the only letter that we have telling us about the first Thanksgiving praises God for the harvest, makes reference to the "goodness of God" in providing for them, and says that the feast was held so that they "might after a special manner rejoice together."⁴ That sounds like a Thanksgiving feast to me! (See the link to *Primary Sources* below.)

Another author states: "In fact, the colonists didn't even call the day Thanksgiving. To them, a thanksgiving was a religious holiday in which they would go to church and thank God for a specific event, such as the winning of a battle. On such a religious day, the types of recreational activities that the pilgrims and Wampanoag Indians participated in during the 1621 harvest feast--dancing, singing secular songs, playing games--wouldn't have been allowed. The feast was a secular celebration, so it never would have been considered a thanksgiving in the pilgrims minds."

A "secular" celebration? Not a "religious" celebration? That all depends on how you define "secular" and "religious." If "religious" celebration can only happen in a church building, then yes, the Pilgrim's thanksgiving was not a religious celebration because it was not a church service. But this certainly misunderstands the mindset of Pilgrims who were steeped in the idea of all life being "religious" and under the providential hand of God. And it certainly is not the way Christians use the term "religious" today. The author is guilty of the fallacy of equivocation (to change the meaning of a key word in order to make your point). The letter which describes the event says "God be praised" and refers to "the "goodness of God." These are not secular statements. Read the letter and decide for yourself.

The event occurred between September 21 and November 11, 1621, with the most likely time being around Michaelmas (September 29), the traditional time for English harvest homes. The settlers asked Squanto and the leader of the Wampanoags, Massasoit, to bring their immediate family and to dine with them. The English had no idea how large Indian families could be and Squanto and Massasoit arrived accompanied by 90 relatives. The feast lasted three days - not just one day as our present Thanksgiving. The Pilgrims and Indians ate outdoors at large tables and competed together in tests of skill and strength.⁶

Governor William Bradford sent "four men fowling" after wild ducks, geese, and turkey.⁷ The warriors brought five deer. The feast probably consisted of the following items (constructed from original sources and historical research by the Plimoth Plantation):

Seethed [boiled] Lobster
Roasted Goose
Boiled Turkey
Fricase of Coney
Pudding of Indian Corn Meal with dried Whortleberries
Seethed Cod
Roasted Duck
Stewed Pumpkin
Roasted Venison with Mustard Sauce
Savory Pudding of Hominy
Fruit and Holland Cheese