



First Thanksgiving, Jean Leon Gerome Ferris, c. 1912-15

The First Thanksgiving

This land is our mother, nourishing all her children ... How can one man say it belongs only to him?

Massasoit, Wampanoag chief

AMERICA'S annual orgy of gastronomic excess—otherwise known as Thanksgiving—is a myth, one of many useful fictions invented by, oddly enough, Abraham Lincoln.

The country was never more divided than during the Civil War, which often found blood brothers in allegiance to opposing sides. The image of Pilgrims and Indians sitting down to give thanks and share a meal together was, in essence, a public relations stunt, designed to help families unite in a nation weary of factionalism and war.

As the story goes, the Pilgrims had a bountiful harvest in 1621, after a long, harsh winter, and organized a celebratory feast.

The previous spring, an amiable Indian named Squanto had generously shown the clueless colonists how to plant corn, and the grateful Pilgrims invited him, along with some of his friends, to share in the feast.

The festivities proceeded without a hitch, everyone lived happily ever after, and Americans—ever cognizant of their eternal debt to the country's native people—have celebrated Thanksgiving on the fourth Thursday in November ever since.

As is often the case with public holidays, however, the real history of Thanksgiving is a bit more complicated—and considerably less harmonious—than the fable suggests.

The 'first' Thanksgiving actually occurred two years before the Pilgrim celebration at Plymouth, when the good ship *Margaret* brought 38 English settlers to the Virginia Colony, where they established the town of Berkeley Hundred on December 4, 1619.

Their sponsors, the London Company, instructed the settlers that the day of the ship's arrival "shall be yearly and in perpetuity kept as a day of thanksgiving."

Only a year later, the *Mayflower*, while anchored off present day Cape Cod, sent a scouting party ashore to the mainland. Finding cleared fields, fresh water and no resistance from the natives in the region, they began settling there shortly afterward.

The generic 'Indians' referred to in tales about the Pilgrims were in fact ancestors of the contemporary Wampanoag Nation, and it's no surprise that the Wampanoags kept their distance when the first settlers arrived.

Four years earlier, European traders had brought smallpox and other diseases to the isolated continent, killing an estimated 45,000 natives, fully two-thirds of the tribe's population. Fearing more deadly outbreaks, they didn't dare approach the new settlers until several months after they'd arrived.

Around this time, the Pilgrims decided to hold a feast, just as the settlers at Berkeley Hundred had. According to native accounts, however, no Indians were invited. Instead, hearing guns being fired into the air in celebration, the Wampanoags sent 90 armed warriors to investigate, prepared to engage in battle. After being informed of the festivities, they decided to camp nearby to make sure they weren't being deceived.

Only about half of the colonists had survived that first deadly winter, and being greatly outnumbered, the nervous Pilgrims proposed a treaty. To their surprise, the Wampanoags agreed, probably reasoning that the aggressive, gun-toting Pilgrims would make good allies against their neighboring enemies, the Naragansetts. (The historic 1621 treaty is commemorated on the 2011 Native American US\$1 coin.)

By the time of the treaty with the Wampanoags, Virginia colonists in and around Jamestown had already fought a fierce four-year war with the Powhatan Confederacy, a collection of tribes occupying an area of 10,000 square miles between the James and Potomac Rivers.

A tense peace reigned after the marriage of Pocahontas and colonist John Rolfe, but hostilities resumed in 1622 after recurring raids by starving settlers on native villages instigated a series of surprise Indian attacks which wiped out a full third of the colony.

A third and final Anglo-Powhatan War in 1644-46 marked the end of the tribal Confederacy, after which the settlers' land grab could resume relatively unopposed.

As a condition of the 1646 peace treaty, the tribes were required to make annual payments in the form of fish and game. The remnants of the two Virginia tribes that still remain today on their 17th century reservations have made it a point of honor to continue paying the tribute, dutifully undertaking the annual trek to the Governor's house in Richmond for over 300 years.

The settlers were not quite as faithful in holding up their end of the bargain: Not a single one of the over 370 treaties signed with America's first inhabitants was honored in perpetuity by the English or American governments. The following two-and-a-half centuries of plague and genocide eliminated 95% of the Native American population — an 'American Holocaust' of perhaps as many as 100 million people — a tragedy many historians consider the single most consequential event in U.S. history.

Ironically, the 1621 'Thanksgiving' treaty was signed on a somewhat more informal holiday celebrated by many Americans today. It's known as *April Fools' Day*. ■