

The First Feast of Thanksgiving for a Bountiful Harvest

Early Fall of 1621

Giving thanks for the Creator's gifts had always been a part of Wampanoag daily life. From ancient times, Native People of North America have held ceremonies to give thanks for harvests.

In England, there were thanks-giving celebrations after successful crops also. The Separatists (our Pilgrim ancestors) celebrated by giving thanks as part of their religion. They had a very strong Christian faith and giving thanks was a daily, and most probably, a continuous expression of their gratitude for their blessings.

[Edward Winslow](#), who would hold several government positions at Plimoth Colony wrote of the planning and construction of their new plantation in Plimoth:

"We set the last spring some twenty acres of Indian corn, and sowed some six acres of barley and pease; and according to the manner of the Indians, we manured our ground with herrings, or rather shads, which we have in great abundance."



Photo furnished by Plimoth Plantation

In the post-harvest autumn of 1621, after a winter of sickness, death and the building of seven "dwelling" houses, the Pilgrims' hard work and sacrifices were rewarded with a bountiful harvest. They gave thanks to God with prayer, feasting and firing their muskets. As many as ninety Wampanoag also joined in the celebration.

Edward Winslow's description of this great feast of thanksgiving, which was the [first feast in the New World](#), was recorded in a letter to a friend of his in England in 1622:

"Our harvest being gotten, our governor sent four men on fowling, that so we might, after a special manner, rejoice together after we had gathered the fruit of our labors. They four in one day killed as much fowl as ... served the company almost a week." Winslow added: "...many of the Indians coming amongst us, and amongst the rest of their greatest king Massasoit, with some ninety men, whom for three days we entertained and feasted." Some Wampanoag left the feast to go hunting and returned with five deer for the Pilgrims; the relationship with the Wampanoag was one of peace and respect.

Governor William Bradford described their food in his journal, later published in *Of Plimoth Plantation, 1620-1647*, writing that they had plenty of cod, bass and other fish during the summer, and fowl, venison and wild turkeys in winter: *"...besides waterfowl there was a great store of wild turkeys, of which they took many."*





Plimoth Plantation photo

Foods of the First Feast

This Thanksgiving, think of 1621

The Pilgrims' new Wampanoag friends had skillfully shown them how to [plant corn](#) which produced the bounty that harvest. Their new friends had shared their skills and the Pilgrims would share their food.

Ask if new recipes can be added your Thanksgiving feast. Try some of the foods of the new Plimoth Colony and the Wampanoag Native Americans. Plimoth Plantation, the museum, not only serves these dishes at their annual feasts, they have shared their [recipes](#) for you to try at home!

Did you know that the Pilgrims draped large cloths over their shoulders to wipe their hands and faces at every meal? Since there were no forks, their utensils were spoons, knives and *fingers*! Suggest that your family do the same, although you may want to first ask permission to use your fingers!

As you are planning for Thanksgiving, consider including the following ingredients for a Pilgrim-themed and memorable meal:

Oysters, Cod, Striped Bass, and Eel - Corn was not the only bountiful food on hand, the cold New England waters were abundant with creatures, ready for catching, and oysters were among them; oyster stuffing is still a popular Thanksgiving staple for many in New England. You may want to add baked cod or bass to your roast turkey, or really venture into the past with smoked eel.

Wild fowl - Wild turkeys may well have been on the Pilgrim's menu, but with the hunting skills of the Pilgrims and Wampanoag, they probably also had goose, duck and pheasant.

Venison - Deer roamed in the New England woods.

Onions and Leeks - Not everyone wants pearled creamed onions as a side dish, but you can include them into a myriad of side dishes. From stuffing to soups and casseroles it is easy to include this autumn vegetable.

Corn - The corn we know today different from the Wampanoag variety that the Pilgrims named, Indian Corn and is also referred to as flint corn today. Nearly four hundred years ago, the Pilgrims were roasting Indian Corn or flint corn. You can buy it ground [Gray's Grist Mill](#) in Westport, Massachusetts. Use it in soups, Bannock Cake or traditional cornbread.

Pumpkin - Pumpkin (pompion as our ancestors called it) was eaten at the First Feast, just not in a pie, but roasted or cooked for hours. Cut them into 1 ½ inch chunks, toss with rosemary, kosher salt, and olive oil, roast in a 350 degree oven for about 30 minutes or until tender. Or take 4 cups of boiled, steamed or baked pumpkin and mash with about 3 tablespoons of butter, a couple of teaspoons of cider vinegar, a teaspoon of ground ginger and salt to taste.

Watercress - Apparently it was on the table at that very first Thanksgiving, and it may well be one of the easiest side-dish ingredients you can use. Simply wash it and chop it for a great salad base.

Mourt's Relation, by Edward Winslow - pages 71-73

<http://www.plimoth.org/learn/just-kids/homework-help/growing-food>

<http://www.plimoth.org/learn/just-kids/recipes> The Plymouth Colony

Archive Project

<http://www.histarch.illinois.edu/plymouth/mourt6.html> <http://mayflowerhistory.com/letter-winslow-1621> <http://mayflowerhistory.com/letter-winslow-1621>