

# Thanksgiving: More than Turkey and Football

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Turkey. Football. Pumpkin pie. Macy's Parade. Family. When Americans think of Thanksgiving, the aforementioned terms tend to cross their minds. But is that what this holiday is really about? If it's not about getting a break from school, and having an excuse to be lazy, overeat, and watch football, what is it about?

The original Thanksgiving feast was a celebration between the Wampanoag Indian tribe and the survivors of the Mayflower's Plymouth colonists for a successful harvest. The Wampanoag Indians shared their knowledge of cultivation and survival success with the Pilgrims. They shared in a harvest meal. This first Thanksgiving took place in 1621, and is now marked as a significant indication of the cooperation between the Native Americans and the British colonists. While this was commemorated as the first Thanksgiving feast, a harvest meal celebration was a tradition among Indian tribes to show their thankfulness for a successful harvest of their crops. These celebrations were common among the Creek, Pueblo, Cherokee, and other tribes. Also included in the celebrations were ceremonial dances and other festivities.

Simply said, the Pilgrims owed the survival of the few remaining largely to the Indians. A harsh winter with snow and sleet made it difficult for them to form their settlement. Without proper shelter blocking the cold, many died. By the following spring, less than 50 Pilgrims remained from the original 102. In March of 1621, an Indian by the name of Samoset surprised the settlers by calling out "Welcome" in English! Samoset had learned English from the previous White settlers, and the following day brought another English-speaking Indian named Squanto to the settlers. Squanto had traveled with some of the White men to Spain and England on their ships, and learned to speak their language. Squanto helped the Pilgrims by teaching them how to tap maple trees, showing them what foliage was toxic and which was edible, how to plant corn, and which plants had medicinal characteristics. With this invaluable knowledge, harvest-time found the Pilgrims with a sufficient food supply, and excess to store for the long, hard winter ahead. This called for a celebration, and the Pilgrims knew that they would have nothing to celebrate had it not been for Squanto and the other Natives. William Bradford, the Pilgrim's Governor proclaimed a celebration, and invited the Native Americans. Massasoit, the Chief, and 90 other Braves attended the celebration. The duration of the celebration was three days, which consisted of games, drum-playing, marching, and the Indians' demonstration of their bow and arrow skills.

In the next few years following, the harvests were not as bountiful. This was a result of climate conditions and the Pilgrims' inexperience. However, a day of thankfulness for what they had continued as a tradition, though unofficially. Through the years, this practice continued, even during the American Revolution. It was not until 1863 that a day of thanksgiving was designated to be observed by President Abraham Lincoln on the fourth Thursday of November. By that time, several states had already adopted a day of annual thanksgiving. Finally, in 1941, Congress declared Thanksgiving an officially-observed National Holiday.

What we as modern Americans consider a Thanksgiving meal is a far cry from what the Indians and Pilgrims feasted on. The only items that are known for a fact to have been on their menu were wild fowl and venison, mentioned in primary sources. Other items they probably had as well were seafood such as lobster, clams, and cod because of their proximity to the coast. Grains were Indian corn and wheat flour, and vegetables served were pumpkin (not in the form of pie), onions, beans, peas, carrots, and lettuce. They may also have had nuts such as acorns, walnuts, and chestnuts. It was a very plain, simple, and modest meal enjoyed with foods in their most natural state. Beans were not transformed into the green-bean casserole, and they did not have sugar to make pumpkin pie, cranberry sauce, or candied yams. Their turkey was served without stuffing, and their vegetables were plain, not dressed up with cheese, sauces, or other extravagant additions. They simply made do with what they had and were thankful for such.

There are several things that many of us do not know regarding Thanksgiving. Though this is somewhat useless information, it is fun and intriguing. Maybe you can share some of these little-known facts at your holiday table.

In 1934, the first Thanksgiving-Day NFL game was held. This game was between the Detroit Lions and the Chicago Bears. Since this was before television broadcasting, NBC radio station covered the game, which was broadcast to 94 stations nation-wide. With the exception of the time frame between 1939 and 1944, the Lions have played every year on Thanksgiving Day. The first televised Thanksgiving football game was in 1956.

Macy's Parade is a well-known part of Thanksgiving Day. It first took place in 1924 in New York City to signify the beginning of the Christmas shopping season. Today, around 3 million people attend the parade, and over 44 million enjoy it at home through their television screen. One of the vital parts of this parade is the hot-air balloon characters. Snoopy has appeared in Macy's Parade more times than any other character, making his sixth appearance in 2006.

Minnesota, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, is the nation's "top turkey-producing state".

Last year, according to the National Turkey Federation, a grand total of 46 million turkeys were eaten at Thanksgivings across the nation.

Thanksgiving comes with other customs. Of course, the general customs include a holiday meal shared with family, watching football, hunting, taking a break from work, and possibly getting started on Christmas shopping the day after. However, many individuals also take this time as an opportunity to give back. Several volunteer to work in homeless shelters, food pantries, or churches where Thanksgiving meals are served to those who are in compromised conditions and would not otherwise be able to afford to enjoy the traditional meal. Canned food drives are common, and the "Season of Miracles" puts the spirit of giving into our hearts.

Thanksgiving is a part of American culture. It signifies the importance of friendship with the Natives of our country. Without their help, our ancestors would probably not have survived. They were in unfamiliar territory with underdeveloped survival skills. The generosity and kindness of the Indians made survival possible. So this Thanksgiving, remember that this holiday is not just an excuse to overeat and watch sports. It is a time to congregate with family and friends, and give thanks for all that we have. Often, we take what we have for granted, and it takes a holiday like this to make us realize just how fortunate we are. Also, take the incentive and give back-volunteer your time serving a meal in a local food pantry to the less-privileged. Or, if your time is limited, donate some non-perishable food to a cause. If nothing else, let your family, friends, and those around you know how much you appreciate them and all that you have. Have a wonderful, safe, and bountiful holiday!