

[Home](#) > [Articles](#) > [1997](#) > [Personal](#) > [Growth](#) > The First Thanksgiving

American History:

The First Thanksgiving

by Chuck Missler

The early settlers of America, who braved the privations of those incredibly difficult years, were a fabulous lot, indeed. We can hardly imagine the burdens they endured to make a new life for themselves in a new land. Their turning point began one Friday in the middle of March, 1621.

Samoset

An Indian, wearing nothing but a leather loincloth, strode up their main street to the common house, and to their startled faces boomed in flawless English, "Welcome."

His name was Samoset, a sagamore (or chief) of the Algonquins. He had been visiting the area for the previous eight months, having learned his English from various fishing captains who had put in to the Maine shore over the years.

He returned the following Thursday with another Indian who also spoke English, and who was to prove "a special instrument of God for their good, beyond their expectation." His story was to prove no less extraordinary than the saga of Joseph being sold into slavery to Egypt. His name was Tisquantum, also called Squanto.

Squanto

His story began in 1605 when Squanto and four other Indians were taken captive, sent to England, and taught English to provide intelligence background on the most favorable places to establish colonies. After nine years in England, Squanto was able to return to Plymouth on Capt. John Smith's voyage in 1614.

Lured and captured by a notorious Capt. Thomas Hunt, he, with 27 others, were taken to Mlaga, Spain, a major slave-trading port. Squanto, with a few others, were bought and rescued by local friars and introduced to the Christian faith. Thus, it appears that God was preparing him for the role he would ultimately play at Plymouth.

He was able to attach himself to an Englishman bound for London, then he joined the family of a wealthy merchant, and ultimately embarked for New England in 1619. He stepped ashore six months before the Pilgrims landed in 1620.¹

When he stepped ashore he received the most tragic blow of his life. Not a man, woman, or child of his own tribe was left alive! During the previous four years, a mysterious plague had broken out among them, killing every last one.² So complete was the devastation that the neighboring tribes had shunned the area ever since. The Pilgrims had settled in a cleared area that belonged to no one. Their nearest neighbors, the Wampanoags, were about 50 miles to the southwest.

Stripped of his identity and his reason for living, Squanto wandered aimlessly until he joined the Wampanoags, having nowhere else to go. But God had other plans.

God's Provision

Massasoit, the sachem (or chief) of the Wapanoags, entered into a peace treaty of mutual aid with the Plymouth colony that was to last as a model for forty years. When Massasoit and his entourage left, Squanto stayed. He had found his reason for living: these English were helpless in the ways of the wilderness. Squanto taught them how to catch eels, stalk deer, plant pumpkins, refine maple syrup, discern both edible herbs and those good for medicine, etc.

Perhaps the most important thing he taught them was the Indian way to plant corn. They hoed six-foot squares in toward the center, putting down four or five kernels, and then fertilizing the corn with fish: three fish in each square, pointing to the center, spokelike. Guarding the field against the wolves (who would try to steal the fish), by summer they had 20 full acres of corn that would save every one of their lives.

Squanto also taught them to exploit the pelts of the beaver, which was in plentiful supply and in great demand throughout Europe. He even guided the trading to insure they got full prices for top-quality pelts. The corn was their physical deliverance;

the beaver pelts would be their economic deliverance.

The First Thanksgiving

The Pilgrims were a grateful people-grateful to God, grateful to the Wamp-anoags, and grateful also to Squanto. Governor Bradford declared a day of public Thanksgiving, to be held in October.

Massasoit was invited and unexpectedly arrived a day early-with an additional ninety Indians! To feed such a crowd would cut deeply into their stores for the winter, but they had learned through all their travails that God could be trusted implicitly.

And it turned out that the Indians did not come empty handed: they brought five dressed deer and more than a dozen fat wild turkeys. They helped with the preparations, teaching the Pilgrim women how to make hoe cakes and a tasty pudding out of cornmeal and maple syrup. In fact, they also showed them how to make one of their Indian favorites: white, fluffy popcorn! (Each time you go to a movie theatre, you should remember the source of this popular treat!)

The Pilgrims, in turn, provided many vegetables from their gardens: carrots, onions, turnips, parsnips, cucumbers, radishes, beets, and cabbages. Also, using some of their precious flour with some of the summer fruits which the Indians had dried, the Pilgrims introduced them to blueberry, apple, and cherry pie. Along with sweet wine made from wild grapes, it was, indeed, a joyous occasion for all concerned.

The Pilgrims and Indians happily competed in shooting contests, foot races, and wrestling. Things went so well (and Massasoit showed no inclination to leave) that this first Thanksgiving was extended for three days.

The moment that stood out the most in the Pilgrims' memories was William Brewster's prayer as they began the festival. They had so much for which to thank God: for providing all their needs-and His provision of Squanto, their teacher, guide, and friend that was to see them through those critical early winters.

A National Institution

By the end of the 19th century, Thanksgiving Day had become an institution throughout New England. It was officially proclaimed as a national holiday by President Abraham Lincoln in 1863. Traditionally celebrated on the last Thursday in November, it was changed by an act of Congress in 1941 to the fourth Thursday of that month.³

Originally observed to acknowledge the provision of God, let us also make this national holiday a very special time to thank Him for our own provision-our families, our sustenance, and, above all, our redemption in His Son!

Let's also pray that He might restore the religious freedom that those early Pilgrims cherished so dearly-and that the current enforced paganism that has invaded our land be curtailed. This country is now becoming what the Pilgrims had risked their very lives to flee from.

Much of this article was excerpted from *The Light and the Glory*, Peter Marshall and David Manuel, Fleming H. Revell Co., Old Tappan, NJ, 1977. For a thrilling and inspiring account of the incredible measures God provided for in the founding of our once-great country, this book is a "must read."

**This article was originally published in the
November 1997 Personal Update NewsJournal.
For a FREE 1-Year Subscription, [click here](#).**

****NOTES****

1. The Pilgrims lived that first winter aboard ship and suffered the loss of 47 colonists.
2. This epidemic, from 1615 to 1617, is believed to have killed 95,000 Indians, leaving only about 5,000 along the coast.
3. Canada first adopted Thanksgiving as a national holiday in November 1879, and it is now celebrated there annually on the second Monday in October.