

# THANKSGIVING RESOURCES

Compiled by the Indigenous New Hampshire  
Collaborative Collective  
Fall 2021



# INTRODUCTION

The origins and mythology of Thanksgiving are deeply tied to settler colonialism in the United States. Because the day is a reminder of the genocide of millions of Indigenous people, the theft of Indigenous lands, and the erasure of Indigenous cultures, it is observed by many Native people as a National Day of Mourning. Participants in the National Day of Mourning honor Indigenous ancestors and Native resistance, and protest ongoing violence against Indigenous people worldwide.

In this spirit of remembrance, truth-telling, and collective action, INHCC has created this web page on Thanksgiving. Here, you can learn more about the actual history of the “First Thanksgiving” in 1621, find out how Thanksgiving became a national holiday, and find resources to educate yourself as well as lesson plans, books, and other tools for teaching young people. We’ve also offered resources designed to help you think through how to use this national holiday as an opportunity to learn, develop a practice of gratitude, and affirm your responsibilities to the peoples Indigenous to the lands you occupy.

Shortcuts to each section can be found here:

[Common Thanksgiving Myths](#)

[The Invention of Thanksgiving](#)

[Resources for Parents & Teachers](#)

[Learn More: Books, Articles, Videos](#)

[Observing the Holiday: Discussion Questions, Activities, Prompts for Action & Reflection](#)

# COMMON THANKSGIVING MYTHS

The following chart was adapted from [“6 Thanksgiving Myths and the Wampanoag Side of the Story”](#), by Vincent Schilling (Akwesasne Mohawk) for *Indian Country Today*.

MYTH	REALITY
The Thanksgiving holiday honors a friendly feast that happened in 1621, and has been celebrated since that time.	The Thanksgiving Day celebration originated from a massacre. The colonizers’ 1621 feast was not repeated in the years to follow. It was only after settlers burned Pequot villages, killing hundreds of men, women, and children, that William Bradford wrote that “For the next 100 years, every Thanksgiving Day ordained by a Governor was in honor of the bloody victory, thanking God that the battle had been won.”
Native Americans and the Pilgrims were great friends.	Relations between Wampanoag peoples and Plimoth settlers were far from friendly. Soon after arriving, settlers raided Native dwellings and fields and stole food and supplies. By the time the “Pilgrims” arrived, Wampanoag communities had already endured epidemic and enslavement at the hands of colonizers.
Native Americans and Pilgrims came together to give thanks and celebrate.	It’s not clear whether the Wampanoag were actually invited to the feast—most accounts indicate that they initially approached the settlement prepared to defend themselves against the Pilgrims’ celebratory gunfire. The meal was an uneasy time for diplomatic negotiation.
They ate turkey, sweet potatoes, and cranberry sauce at the first Thanksgiving.	There is no proof that turkey was eaten at the 1621 meal! Sweet potatoes were not yet grown in North America, and it is unlikely that cranberries would have been eaten without sugar. The meal may have actually included geese, duck, venison, pumpkin, succotash, and Indian corn.
Europeans appreciated Squanto’s help.	Before his time with the “Pilgrims,” “Squanto” (Tisquantum) was kidnapped as a child and sold into slavery in Europe—this was why he spoke English. When he returned to his village, the rest of his tribe had been killed by battle or disease.
Pilgrims taught Indians about Thanksgiving.	Before the Pilgrims ever set foot on Wampanoag land, the Indigenous communities of the Eastern woodlands had been giving thanks and observing autumnal harvest celebrations for centuries.

# THE INVENTION OF THANKSGIVING

## The History of the Holiday

In the fall of 1621, a three-day feast did take place at Plymouth Colony. This event has been widely mythologized as the foundational origin story for Thanksgiving as a national American holiday. At the time, though, the meal that is now known as the “First Thanksgiving” wasn’t especially noteworthy!

Almost everything we now know about that feast comes from a single letter written in December 1621 by Edward Winslow, one of the passengers who sailed aboard the Mayflower in 1620. That letter was lost—and the feast completely forgotten—until the writer Alexander Young rediscovered Winslow’s letter and included it in a footnote of his 1841 book *Chronicles of the Pilgrim Fathers*. As it turned out, Plymouth Colony’s 1621 governor, William Bradford, also included one small reference to the feast in his book *Of Plymouth Plantation*, which he wrote more than 20 years after the event itself. That manuscript, stolen by the British during the Revolutionary War was recovered in the 1850s, just in time for magazine editor Sarah Josepha Hale to incorporate it (and Winslow’s letter) into her campaign to create an official national Thanksgiving holiday.

In 1863, Abraham Lincoln proclaimed the final Thursday in November as a national Thanksgiving holiday for the first time. In a moment of national precarity and escalating conflict centered on slavery and race, Lincoln hoped the holiday would bring people together in peace during the Civil War. At this same time, “Indian wars” were raging in the West—in 1862, for example, Lincoln himself had just sanctioned the hanging of 38 Dakota men in the largest single-day mass execution in American history.

It’s important to examine the historical context for the creation of Thanksgiving to understand the political work that the holiday did (and still does)—by reinforcing the myths of a nation built on unity, friendship, neighborliness, and Christian values of gratitude, the invention of Thanksgiving strengthened the foothold of the growing nation, reinforcing the moral authority of its claims to land through the continued processes of Western expansion and accompanying Indigenous genocide and dispossession.

However, when Lincoln issued the Thanksgiving Proclamation in 1863, the story of the 1621 feast hadn’t yet fully come to be popularly understood as the “First Thanksgiving.” As Philip Deloria notes, only later would the

holiday consolidate its narrative around a harmonious Pilgrim-Wampanoag feast. Through waves of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century immigration and xenophobia, the “Pilgrims” were cast as “national founders: white, Protestant, democratic, and blessed with an American character centered on family, work, individualism, freedom, and faith.” Glorifying the Pilgrims and the heartwarming myth of the “First Thanksgiving” diverted attention from the brutality of Jim Crow and ongoing anti-Black violence in the United States—as well as downplayed the foundational role of African slavery in the country’s establishment.

## Resources

[The Invention of Thanksgiving](#) – a short & entertaining video interview with National Museum of the American Indian curator Paul Chaat Smith (Comanche)

[Abraham Lincoln’s 1863 Thanksgiving Proclamation](#) – includes discussion questions from the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History

[The Invention of Thanksgiving](#) – excellent article by Philip Deloria (Standing Rock Sioux) for The New Yorker

[Monumental Mobility: The Memory Work of Massasoit](#) – book by Lisa Blee & Jean M. O’Brien (White Earth Ojibwe)

# RESOURCES FOR PARENTS AND TEACHERS

## Lesson Plans & Activities

[Abbe Museum: Thanksgiving Lesson Plan](#) (Grades 3-5) — excellent lesson plan exploring harvest traditions, centering cross-cultural exchange

[Thanksgiving Mourning](#) — from Teaching Tolerance; grades 6-12; has students read & analyze two texts about Thanksgiving written by Native authors

[American Indian Perspectives on Thanksgiving](#) – from the National Museum of the American Indian; grades 4–8, examines the deeper meaning of the Thanksgiving holiday for American Indians through the themes of environment, community, encounters, and innovations; includes suggested classroom activities for each theme

[Thanksgiving activity for the classroom; also available in Spanish](#) — from the National Museum of the American Indian; grades K-5; corn necklace activity designed as an alternative to culturally inappropriate paper feather-headress

[Harvest Ceremony: Beyond the Thanksgiving Myth, A Study Guide](#) — from the National Museum of the American Indian; good overview of the story of the “First Thanksgiving,” with classroom discussion topics

[Lesson plan: After helping Pilgrims, today’s Wampanoag tribe fight for their ancestral lands](#) — from PBS Newshour Extra; for grades 9-12; focuses on contemporary Wampanoag resistance

The Real Thanksgiving: [Lesson Plan](#) and [Teacher Guide](#) — from Bioneers

## **Books & Resources for Young People**

[Recommended Thanksgiving books](#) – from Oyate

[Thanksgiving books to avoid](#) – from Oyate

[Beyond the So-Called First Thanksgiving: 5 Children’s Books that Set the Record Straight](#) – Indian Country Today

[Giving Thanks: A Native American Good Morning Message](#) – a book by Chief Jake Swamp (Mohawk). [Video](#) of Chief Jake Swamp reading the book.

[The Mourning Road to Thanksgiving](#) – novel by Larry Spotted Crow Mann (Nipmuc)

[If You Lived During the Plimoth Thanksgiving](#) — Chris Newell (Passamaquoddy); ages 7-10

[Thanksgiving: Brainpop Junior](#) — made in consultation with Wampanoag advisors, centers Wampanoag experiences in telling of the ‘First Thanksgiving’

[Thanksgiving from Wampanoag Youth](#) — from Mashpee TV; Wampanoag youth perspectives on Thanksgiving

[Echoes of the Ancestors](#) virtual museum exhibit from Plimoth Patuxet and accompanying [elementary grade game](#)

## Advice & Training for Educators

[Rethinking Thanksgiving: Native Perspectives on Thanksgiving](#) – from the National Museum of the American Indian; directs K-12 educators to age-appropriate resources/lesson plans/activities

[Decolonizing Thanksgiving: A Toolkit for Combating Racism in Schools](#) – Medium

[Five Ideas to Change Teaching about Thanksgiving, in Classrooms and at Home](#); from the National Museum of the American Indian

Giving Thanks: Telling More Complete Narratives in your Classroom (webinar by the National Museum of the American Indian)

[Session 1](#) and [Session 2](#)

See the “Learn More” section below for more resources appropriate for adults and upper-level students

## LEARN MORE

### Articles

[Why I’m Not Thankful For Thanksgiving](#) – by Michael Dorris (Modoc descent), from *Rethinking Columbus: The Next 500 Years*

[No Thanks: How Thanksgiving Narratives Erase the Genocide of Native Peoples](#) — by Joanne Barker (Lenape)

[Everything You Learned About Thanksgiving is Wrong](#) — NY Times

Thanksgiving for Native Americans: [Four Voices on a Complicated Holiday](#) — NY Times

[The Myths of the Thanksgiving Story and the Lasting Damage They Imbue](#) — Smithsonian Magazine

[Do American Indians celebrate Thanksgiving?](#) — Smithsonian blog

[This tribe helped the Pilgrims survive for their first Thanksgiving. They regret it 400 years later](#) — Washington Post

[Suppressed Speech of Wamsutta James \(Wampanoag\)](#) – Text of the speech that Wamsutta was not allowed to deliver at the three-hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the colonists’ landing on Plymouth Rock in 1970

## Books

[The Mourning Road to Thanksgiving](#) – novel by Larry Spotted Crow Mann (Nipmuc)

[Monumental Mobility: The Memory Work of Massasoit](#) — Lisa Blee and Jean M. O'Brien (White Earth Ojibwe)

[This Land Is Their Land: The Wampanoag Indians, Plymouth Colony, and the Troubled History of Thanksgiving](#) — David J. Silverman

## Videos & Podcasts

[Thanksgiving](#) — from Toasted Sister podcast; focused on Thanksgiving history and past & present Indigenous foodways

[One Word Clips, Native Americans on Thanksgiving](#) — 5 minute video compiling Native perspectives on Thanksgiving

[The Invention of Thanksgiving](#) — short video from the National Museum of the American Indian

[Thanksgiving from Wampanoag Youth](#) — from Mashpee TV; Wampanoag youth on Thanksgiving

[Thanksgiving: Brainpop Junior](#) — made in consultation with Wampanoag advisors, centers Wampanoag experiences in telling of the 'First Thanksgiving'

[Historian Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz on Thanksgiving : “It Has Never Been About Honoring Native Americans”](#) — Democracy Now! Interview

[\(Re\)Telling the American Story](#) — also from the National Museum of the American Indian, via their Youth In Action: Conversations About our Future webinar series

[Harvard Museums of Science & Culture podcast episode Wampanoag Perspectives on Objects with Elizabeth P. & Meredith V.](#) — transcript available [here](#); virtual museum exhibit [Listening to Wampanoag Voices: Beyond 1620](#) available [here](#)

## INHCC Blog Posts

[INHCC Blog Post: “The Story of the ‘First Thanksgiving’”](#)



[INHCC Guest Blog Post: “What Students Did and Didn’t Learn about the ‘First Thanksgiving’”](#)

## Wampanoag Communities Today

The Wampanoag—or Wôpanâak—are still here. Visit their tribal websites here:

- [Wampanoag Tribe of Gay Head \(Aquinnah\)](#)
  - [Timeline](#) of Wampanoag history
- [Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe](#)
  - [Timeline](#) of Wampanoag history
- [Herring Pond Wampanoag Tribe](#)
- [Chappaquiddick Wampanoag Tribe](#)
- [Pocasset Wampanoag Tribe \(Pokanoket Nation\)](#)

Also visit the website of the [Wôpanâak Language Reclamation Project](#)—and [make a donation now](#).

## **OBSERVING THE HOLIDAY:**

## **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS, ACTIVITIES, AND PROMPTS FOR ACTION & REFLECTION**

*You the white man are celebrating an anniversary. We the Wampanoags will help you celebrate in the concept of a beginning. It was the beginning of a new life for the Pilgrims. Now, 350 years later it is a beginning of a new determination for the original American: the American Indian....We stand tall and proud, and before too many moons pass we'll right the wrongs we have allowed to happen to us.*

From the suppressed speech of Wamsutta James, 1970

*Some allies only rise up in resistance when it is convenient and comfortable for them. We all need to be willing to take risks and actually stand for something. This resistance takes real commitment, not just convenient tolerance. Who are we expecting to do all the work of reconciliation? Who will rise up to help shift cultural institutions and systems of power? We can honour Indigenous traditions with a feast, giving thanks every autumn while also raising a middle finger in resistance to the system that has commercialized and bastardized that feast, in a No \*\*\*\*ing Thanks-giving salute. Let's acknowledge that anger, face those fears, and challenge that power.*

From "Research & Reconciliation: Unsettling Ways of Knowing Through Indigenous Relationships," by Shawn Wilson, Andrea V. Breen, & Lindsay Dupré

What does it look like to say "No \*\*\*\*ing thanks" to the violence that lies at the core of Thanksgiving? The goal of this section is to guide reflection on what it might look like to observe or mark a national holiday that both celebrates family, food, gratitude, and abundance and glorifies settler colonial violence.

First, a few guiding questions:

- What does it mean to observe a holiday that is so deeply rooted in Indigenous genocide?
- How can we adjust existing traditions to bring them in line with our values? How can we take the day as an opportunity to educate ourselves, develop ethics of gratitude and accountability, and commit ourselves to action for justice?
- How might we celebrate the components of the holiday that feel important or redeemable? How can we do that without erasing Indigeneity from the holiday altogether? (What might be wrong with celebrating a sanitized version of the holiday that boils it down to a harvest celebration of family and food?)
- How can we acknowledge and work to repair the harm done by popular Thanksgiving narratives?

## Observing a National Day of Mourning

The first [National Day of Mourning](#) demonstration was held in 1970 after Frank Wamsutta James' speaking invitation was rescinded from a Massachusetts Thanksgiving celebration commemorating the 350th anniversary of the landing of the *Mayflower*. Since then, the United American Indian Tribes of New England have organized an annual demonstration to dispel myths surrounding the story of Thanksgiving and raise awareness of historical and contemporary Indigenous struggles. There are many ways to honor the National Day of Mourning:

- Attend the demonstration or [watch the livestream on Youtube](#) —and check if there are any Day of Mourning events taking place in your area
- With your family, friends, or loved ones, read aloud and discuss the [Suppressed Speech of Wamsutta James \(Wampanoag\)](#) — the address that Wamsutta was not allowed to deliver at the three-hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the colonists' landing on Plymouth Rock
- At your holiday gathering, hold a prayer, moment of silence, or moment of reflection to remember the lives lost because of colonization and honor the people whose land you are occupying
- Donate (or match) the money you would spend on a large meal to a Native grassroots movement, or to the [Wôpanâak Language Reclamation Project](#).

## At the Table: Prompts for Discussion

Below are several themed suggestions for prompting and facilitating discussion among family and loved ones on and around Thanksgiving:

Learning & Unlearning

- Where did you learn the story of Thanksgiving?
- How does it feel to realize that many of the things you learned about Thanksgiving are myths?
- What are the dangers of continuing to perpetuate the myths of Thanksgiving with the excuse that children are “too young” to learn the truths?
- How does the reality of colonization compare to the myth of a U.S. society based upon “liberty and justice for all?”

Gratitude in Practice

If your Thanksgiving holiday involves sharing what you're thankful for, also consider:

- Building land acknowledgment into your statements of gratitude: be grateful for the land you're on, and acknowledge the relationships that Indigenous peoples maintain with that land
- Ask yourself and your family: Who has suffered for us to have the things we are grateful for now? Consider Indigenous people, enslaved Black people, and even your own immigrant ancestors (if you have them).
- Also ask: What responsibility do we have to the people who have suffered for our comfort? For example, what responsibility do we have to Indigenous Peoples whose land bases are being degraded so we might have cheap electricity, oil, and water?

Learn about Indigenous practices of thanks-giving:

- Native people around the country have different ways of approaching the idea of giving thanks. Research practices of giving thanks among Native people in the region where you live. Why is giving thanks important to them? How do their ways of giving thanks impact your understanding of Native people and the Thanksgiving holiday?
- Read or listen to [Giving Thanks: A Native American Good Morning Message](#) – a book by Chief Jake Swamp (Mohawk). [Video](#) of Chief Jake Swamp reading the book.

What would it look like to practice gratitude as an ethic every day?

- How can you observe this holiday in the spirit of gratefulness without erasing the pain of Indigenous people?
- How can gratitude motivate us to be accountable to others...to Indigenous people, to the land, and to our communities?
- What are the relationships between gratitude, accountability, and reciprocity?
- What does giving thanks look like in practice? How can you practice it in your life?
- Is it possible to observe the holiday in a spirit of gratefulness without ignoring the pain of Indigenous people who were here before any other Americans?

Taking Action

Ask yourself and your family:

- Whose ancestral lands are you living on that are now occupied by the US?
- What do you know about where your own ancestors came from and how they came to the land where you/they live currently? How is your family's history intertwined with the struggles of Indigenous people...and how might this inform your commitment to action?

What are the people Indigenous to the land where you live currently struggling for? How can you support those struggles?

- Find ways to engage in local Indigenous rights issues and support the work of Indigenous communities where you live.
- Check to see if Indigenous communities where you live have organized "voluntary land tax," "real rent," or other system for paying monetary or land-based reparations.
- If you live on N'dakinna, explore the INHCC website! Take action to support dam removal, push your lawmakers to adopt Indigenous Peoples' Day, and fight against the use of racist Indigenous mascots.

How can you support the resistance and organizing of Indigenous people nation-wide?

- Support Indigenous nations in struggles to end destructive, extractive practices, including the extraction and transportation of fossil fuels
- Support calls for Indigenous sovereignty and land back

What opportunities do you have to engage in conversations about changing mascots, monuments, and other harmful representations of Indigenous peoples?

How can you educate yourself about Indigenous history and contemporary struggles more broadly?

- Read Vine Deloria's 1969 book *Custer Died for Your Sins* or Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz's book *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States*.
- Utilize the book suggestions and educational resources found [here](#) and throughout the rest of this website.

## Harvest, Feasting, & Food

Food can be a useful point of entry for promoting discussion and learning! Most traditional “Thanksgiving” food comes from Indigenous American agriculturalists. Take stock of the foods at your dinner table. Choose a food item and learn:

- Where did it originate?
- How long has it been grown by that specific tribal community?
- What do that community’s oral traditions say about the relationship between the people and the food?

Learn about local Indigenous harvest traditions:

- What are the Harvest traditions of the peoples Indigenous to where you live? How have those changed over time? How are those maintained now?
- Are any of the plants/animals central to Indigenous harvest traditions in your region threatened? How can you work to protect them?

Celebrate your own cultural and culinary heritage:

- If you are not Indigenous to the land where you live, where did your ancestors come from?
- What are the harvest traditions of your ancestors?
- What are the other culinary traditions of your ancestors?
- How do you bring these cultural traditions to Thanksgiving? Or how could you?

### **Other Guides to Critically Observing Thanksgiving:**

[How to Observe Thanksgiving While Acknowledging the Holiday’s Messed Up History – Bustle](#)

[Indigenous Solidarity Network: Rethinking “Thanksgiving” Toolkit](#)