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... and What’s Wrong-er With This One?
The True Story of the

by Patricia Scott Deetz

What comes to mind when you think of the first Thanksgiving? Something like this painting by N.C. Wyeth? Men wearing tall black hats, women in white caps, and an Indian in a blanket keeping an eye on the turkey while they listen to the Thanksgiving prayer? The painting looks more or less right, doesn't it?

Well, it's not. Wyeth, who designed this mural in 1940, was painting our idea of Thanksgiving rather than what actually happened. We don't know much about life in Plymouth colony in the fall of 1621, less than a year
First Thanksgiving

after the settlers arrived on the Mayflower. But what we do know suggests that the feast held that fall didn’t look much like Wyeth’s picture.

We have only one eyewitness account of the first Thanksgiving. It is a letter a settler named Edward Winslow wrote on 11 December 1621 to a friend in England. Like many pioneers, Winslow talked about how plentiful food and game were in America, probably because he hoped to encourage other people to make the risky ocean crossing and join the settlers.
Edward Winslow Writing to a Loving Friend, 
11 December 1621

Winslow’s letter isn’t very long. However, it gives us several clues to what really took place that fall.

NEW-ENGLAND, &c.

them in the blast of snow, our harvest being gotten, and ourGovernor sent his son into England, that so we might our

A LETTER SENT FROM
New-England to a friend in these parts,

settling forth a briefe and true Declaration

of the worth of that Plantation;

And containing sundry Directions

for those that intend a Vagate

hereafter.

Owing, and old Friend, although I received no Letter from you by this ship, yet from such as I know you exceed the performance of my promise, which way to write unto you truly and faithfully of all things. I have therefore at this instant written unto you accordingly. Referring you for further information to our more large Relations. You shall understand, that in this Instant, that a few of us have been here, we have built houses dwelling houses, and for the rest of the Plantation, and have made preparation for divers others. We are the first Spring grown twenty Acres of Indian corn, and found some of Barley & Pease, and according to the manner of the Indians, we managed our ground with Hergins or other Shallos, which we have to great planters, and take with great ease in our doocots. Our Corne did prove well, & God be praised, we had a good increase of Indian Corne, and our Barley indifferent good. But our Pease not worth the gathering, for we feared they were too late flowers, they came up very well, and blussomed, but the Sunne parched them.

Winthrop’s letter as it appeared in the book History of Plymouth Plantation 1620-1647.

10 muse

"... some of the Indians coming amongst us, and among the rest their greatest King Massasoit, with some ninte men..."

One of the odder things about Winthrop’s painting is the toillary Indian. In fact, there were more Indians than settlers at the feast. One hundred and two people had sailed on the Mayflower for America. On the way one died and one was born. But only 50 survived the first winter in Plymouth. Of these, 13 were children under 12, and 13 were teenagers. That leaves 24 adults. Massachusetts, Winslow saw, brought 90 men to the feast, and some Indians were eagerly visiting the colony.
...our harvest being gotten in...

We traditionally celebrate Thanksgiving in November. However, the celebration in 1621 happened earlier, at harvest time. In New England, depending on when the crops were planted and how fast they ripened, that would have been in the early fall, certainly not later than early October.

It wasn't until the Civil War that President Lincoln made the fourth Thursday in November Thanksgiving Day.

...our governor sent some men on fowling...

"Fowling" meant hunting birds (fowl). The birds were probably ducks and geese because the harvest would have been at the same time as their fall migration. During the migration, it would have been easy for four men to shoot enough birds to provide the settlers with food for a week.

Winslow does NOT mention turkeys.

...amongst other recreations, we exercised our arms...

Exercised our arms means the settlers fired guns, probably in some kind of drill, or shot at targets. It is also possible they had archery contests with the Indians. What could some of the "other recreations" have been? We know that some of the settlers played stool ball, an early form of cricket, and that the English enjoyed throwing weights. They might also have been dancing and tumbling.

In any case, the celebration is likely to have been rowdy and noisy, not subdued and solemn. There would have been gunfire, running and jumping, laughter and shouting—in two languages.

Spot the Turkey

The settlers and Indians are often shown feasting on turkey, cranberry sauce and pumpkin pie.

But there is no evidence that the settlers ate turkey at the first Thanksgiving. Although cranberries grew in Plymouth, the settlers made no use of them, and pumpkin pie did not come along until much later.

So what did the settlers and their Indian guests eat? Probably ducks, geese and venison (deer) roasted on spits. Pottage (stews) made by cooking corn—and possibly wheat—in a broth made from stewed meat. Fish, eels and shellfish, including lobster. And plenty of beer! In 1621 everyone drank beer, even the children!

For utensils, they would have had spoons, sharp, pointed knives, and their fingers, but no forks. While the English nobility of the time might have used forks, most people regarded them as unnecessary luxuries. The earliest fork found at Plymouth dates from the end of the 17th century.
Forget what you learned in first grade: here's what the Pilgrims and their native guests looked like. Note complete absence of stupid buckles on hats, shoes, belts, anywhere. Let this be a lesson to you: never trust a first-grade teacher. Oh, sure, they seem nice... but they lie.

Pilgrim (Male)
- Type: human
- Home: England
- Interests: praying, not freezing to death, praying

Native American (Male)
- Type: human
- Home: North America
- Interests: hunting, fishing, hanging out with the tribe

Were there any paramecia at the first Thanksgiving?
Since none were mentioned in the Winslow letter, we can't be sure. Just to be on the safe side, we've included them on this handy chart. It will save you time and embarrassment the next time a Pilgrim, native American, or paramecium comes tramping through your backyard.

Paramecium (?)
- Type: single-celled organism
- Home: fresh water, mostly in leafy areas
- Interests: eating, swimming in a spiral motion

12 muse
Did you notice that Winslow makes no mention of giving thanks? He acknowledges the goodness of God, but that is as close as he gets. What was really taking place was not a form of worship, but rather the old English custom of celebrating the harvest of the year's crop with revelry and feasting. With the passing of time, memories of this celebration were blended with celebrations people invented to honor the Pilgrims, and the original harvest feast gradually became the Thanksgiving we know today.

Thanksgiving became a national holiday in 1863 by proclamation of President Abraham Lincoln. Why then and not earlier? The country was being torn apart by the Civil War, a war in which brother fought against brother. How could Lincoln ask all Americans to give thanks to God for his goodness at such a terrible time? Lincoln wanted to unify people in the midst of turmoil. Great statesman that he was, he could see that despite the agony of civil war, the U.S. was still at peace with other nations.
it was still ruled by law and prosperous. There was much to be thankful for.

So Thanksgiving as we think of it today is largely a myth. But this isn’t necessarily bad. Stories like the one about Thanksgiving are usually called origin myths, and people the world over have them. Origin myths give us a shared sense of what it means to be an American and, especially in a country as diverse as ours, this is a good thing.

But not everyone feels included by our Thanksgiving myth. In 1970, Native Americans declared Thanksgiving a National Day of Mourning and chose Plymouth as the place where it would be observed. To them, Thanksgiving has come to symbolize not a beginning but an end: the tragic destruction of their culture.

Patricia Drettz is a cultural historian with an M.A. in history from Rhodes University, South Africa. Her husband, James Drettz, who is well known for bringing the Plymouth story to life at Plymouth Plantation, was often interviewed at Thanksgiving time. The next day a story with a headline like “Meals of Life and Lot of Noses” would appear in the paper.
1) The settlers are wearing hats with big silver buckles. 2) They are feasting on roast turkey. 3) The pilgrims outnumber the Indians, instead of the other way around. 4) Missionaries would also join the following mission. 5) Log cabins were never built at Plymouth. Instead, the settlers built houses whose walls were made of flexible bentwood woven between upright posts and plastered with clay. 6) Because the settlers had few tables or chairs, most of the dinner would then sit on the ground, and the table would not have had a tablecloth. 7) The standing Indian had a peace pipe, or calumet; this was used by native peoples to the west but was unknown in New England.