

Diplomacy in New England

THE FIRST THANKSGIVING?

The First People

In 1620, the area from Narragansett Bay in eastern Rhode Island to the Atlantic Ocean in southeastern Massachusetts, including Cape Cod, Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket, was the home of a village people who called themselves the Pokanoket. Around the time of King Philip's War in 1675, they became known as the Wampanoag. Although they were culturally, politically, religiously and economically similar to the Narragansett to the west, they did not speak the same language, and the Narragansett were considered their traditional enemies.

The Wampanoag practiced agriculture and followed a seasonal round of gardening and fishing near the coast in spring and summer, moving to sheltered inland locations for hunting in fall and winter. Several varieties of corn, beans, and squash were cultivated, and these, along with numerous wild vegetables, nuts, and fruits were dried and stored in underground caches and traded to other groups for things they needed but did not produce themselves.

Wampanoag society was stratified, and social position was inherited. Each village was headed by a leader called a **sachem**, who ruled by persuasion and by consent of the people. Ordinarily the sachemship was passed down through the male line in royal families, but a woman did inherit the position if there was no male heir, and a sachem could be usurped by someone who could maintain the allegiance of enough people. An unjust or unwise sachem could find himself with no one to lead, as sachems had no authority to force the people to do anything. If people did not like their sachem, they were free to move and switch allegiances.

The villages of the Wampanoag were united in a confederation of village units presided over by a chief sachem. The sachem of each village collected tribute from the people of his village in the form of a portion of the hunt and the harvest. This food was sent to the chief sachem to be redistributed to the needy of all villages. In 1620, the chief sachem of the Wampanoag was a remarkable statesman named Massasoit.

Spiritual beliefs involved a reciprocal relationship with nature. Offerings in the form of food and precious objects, such as laboriously made shell beads, were given back to the earth to express thankfulness and respect to supernatural beings,

for the Wampanoag understood that you cannot keep taking from the earth without giving something back. It has long been customary for horticultural Indian people to have ceremonies in which they express their thanks for a bountiful harvest. The Wampanoag celebrated their harvest with a ceremony, the *Nikkomosachmiawene*, that combined feasting, dancing and ceremonial games with a "give away" in which people gave some of their possessions to the poor.

In 1616-1617, three to four years before the European adventurers and religious refugees anchored the Mayflower in Cape Cod Bay, the Indians of southern New England had been decimated by diseases introduced by European explorers. The effects of the diseases were particularly hard felt along the coast. Whole villages were wiped out; it is estimated that as many as three fourths of the Wampanoag were killed. The entire population of the Wampanoag village of Pawtuxet was wiped out by a terrible plague. When the Europeans founded Plimoth Plantation amid the ruins of the villages of Pawtuxet, they found the bones of the dead littering the ground, because there was no one left to bury them.

The Immigrants

A majority of those who came to America on the Mayflower came to make a profit from the products of the land, the rest were religious dissenters who fled their own country because of religious intolerance. The little band of religious refugees and entrepreneurs (they called themselves "saints" and "strangers") who arrived on the Mayflower that December of 1620 were poorly prepared to survive. They did not bring enough food, and they arrived too late to plant. They were not familiar with the area and lacked the knowledge, tools, and experience to effectively exploit the bounty of nature that surrounded them. For the first several months two or three died each day from scurvy, lack of adequate shelter, and poor nutrition. They discovered that the Wampanoag placed grain and precious ornaments with the dead and they robbed Wampanoag graves to steal the ornaments and feed the living.

Contact

The Wampanoag were facing danger of a different kind. Their enemies, the Narragansett, who lived to the west, were hardly affected by the epidemic. They were now much more numerous than the Wampanoag, and the balance of power was tipping in their favor. The Wampanoag were undergoing pressure from the Narragansett, who were beginning to demand tribute from some Wampanoag villages. Seeking a military alliance with the Europeans, who possessed formidable weapons with their muskets and fowling pieces, the Wampanoag befriended them. The initial advances were made by two Indian men who knew how to speak English. Samoset, an Abenaki from Maine, and Tisquantum, a Wampanoag, had both learned English as slaves in Europe. Tisquantum (called Squanto by the Europeans) was a Pawtuxet Wampanoag who had been kidnapped by Europeans and sold into slavery a few years before the epidemic. Tisquantum escaped by jumping overboard and swimming ashore on a return trip to the New England coast. When he found his way to his village, he discovered he was the only living Pawtuxet.

As the "starving time" of the European's first winter turned to spring, Tisquantum began to teach the Europeans how to survive and he set up a meeting between the Chief Sachem Massasoit, and the first Governor of Plimoth, John Carver. Massasoit then negotiated a peace treaty with the newcomers in which they pledged to maintain friendly relations with each other, and to come to each other's aid in case of outside attack, among other things.

The summer passed and Tisquantum helped the newcomers learn to plant and care for Indian crops, to hunt and fish, and to do all the things that were necessary to partake of the natural abundance of the earth in this particular place.

The Harvest Celebration

As a result of the help that the Europeans got from their new allies, they overcame their inexperience and, by the fall of 1621, their first year in Wampanoag country, they realized a successful harvest. They planted their fields with a mixture of European seeds and corn given to them by Massasoit. Their foreign seeds did not do well, but the corn crop saved them. They decided to celebrate their success with a harvest festival,

the Harvest Home, that they had probably all experienced as children. The Harvest Home consisted of non-stop feasting and drinking, sporting events, and parading in the fields shooting off their muskets. This is the celebration that Edward Winslow relates in his letter of December 11, 1621. This letter is the principle surviving written record specifically describing the events of the "First Thanksgiving."

Our harvest being gotten in, our Governor sent four men on fowling, that so we might after a more special manner rejoice together, after we had gathered the fruits of our labours. They four in one day killed as much fowl as, with a little help beside, served the Company almost a week. At which time, amongst other recreations, we exercised our arms, many of the Indians coming amongst us, and amongst the rest their greatest king, Massasoit with some 90 men, whom for three days we entertained and feasted. And they went out and killed five deer which they brought to the plantation and bestowed on our Governor and upon the Captain and others. (1)

Although there is nothing in this letter to suggest the giving of thanks, this is the celebration that has traditionally been associated with the contemporary holiday, Thanksgiving. The "First Thanksgiving" was based on customs that the Europeans brought with them. The Indian contribution to the event was the menu. Roast wild duck, goose and turkey, venison made into pies with corn meal crusts, were Indian food. The robust ale, made from their one successful English crop of barley was the main non-native food. In many ways this three day feast symbolizes a rarely achieved relationship of peaceful coexistence between Indians and Europeans in the 17th century.

Study Questions

1. Who were the Native Americans that first encountered the European Immigrants in 1621 in the Northeast? Where do they live today? *Wampanoags met the pilgrims. They were living in the area around Plymouth, Massachusetts. They lived in round bark covered houses and ate things they grew, such as corn, beans and squash, they hunted, fished and gathered wild fruits and nuts. Sap was collected in the spring to make syrup. Their leaders were called Sachems. The descendants of the people who met the pilgrims are very proud of their Wampanoag heritage. Today they are called the Mashpee and Gay Head Wampanoags. They reside in Massachusetts.*

2. Why did so many Native people die after the Europeans' arrival? *While many Native people died from displacement and acts of war, more Native people died inadvertently from diseases brought by Europeans against which Native Americans did not have immunities.*

3. Before the Europeans arrived, who were the enemies of the Wampanoags? *Although they were culturally, politically, religiously and economically similar to the Narragansett to the west, the Wampanoags did not speak the same language and the Narragansett were considered their traditional enemies.*

4. What food did the Wampanoags teach the European immigrants to grow/catch? *Fish and shellfish, deer, waterfowl, turkey, corn, squash, pumpkin. Trees were tapped in the spring to get syrup.*

5. What is the difference between Native American "thanksgiving" and the European Americans' Thanksgiving holiday? *Native Americans customarily give thanks throughout the year to the natural world which is considered to be our spiritual mother. Spiritual beliefs involve a reciprocal relationship with nature. Offerings in the form of food and precious objects are given back to the earth to express thankfulness and respect to supernatural beings, for the Native people understand that you cannot keep taking from the earth without giving something back. European American Thanksgiving is a European tradition of giving thanks at the end of the harvest, in the fall. It is not a religious holiday, rather a time of joy and celebration.*

Afterward

Although the peaceful relations established by Massasoit were often strained by dishonest, aggressive and brutal actions on the part of the Colonists, Massasoit kept his part of the treaty all his life. At the death of Massasoit in 1661, forty years after the landing of the first "boat people," the fragile peace began to deteriorate. In 1675, full-scale war erupted, ending with the defeat of the Wampanoag under Massasoit's son, Pometacom, called King Philip by the English. Decimated by European diseases and defeated in war, by the late 17th century the Wampanoag became a subjugated minority in the land of their ancestors.

The Wampanoag Today

Although their language and their land was, for the most part, lost, and most accepted Christianity, they have kept their Indian identity. Today there are two enclaves of Wampanoags in Massachusetts, one at Mashpee, the other at Gay Head on Martha's Vineyard. If their present lifestyle more closely resembles their non-Indian neighbor's than their 17th century ancestors', it must be pointed out that non-Indians do not live like their 17th century ancestors either. Indians and non-Indians have always undergone change, and both maintain links to their past. Thanksgiving is a transplanted European harvest festival. It is still composed of a display of plenty, focused on an elaborate feast. Today's Thanksgiving football games are the modern equivalent of the English farmer's medieval harvest-time tradition of staging sporting events, such as leaping, vaulting, and archery. The turkey shoot, which survives in some areas, has evolved

from the medieval practice of "exercising arms."

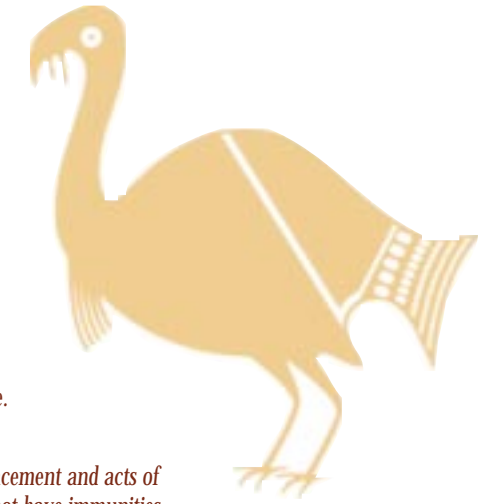
The Wampanoag have kept alive a vital and significant oral tradition with aspects that their pre-contact ancestors would recognize. They actively participate as Wampanoags in political and cultural arenas, maintaining their identity in symbolic and tangible ways.

Text Reference

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Sachem

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About Corn

Corn was the most important staple food that was cultivated in North America. The settlers, having no knowledge of the growing cycles, depended on the Native Americans to teach them about growing corn, otherwise they would not have survived! Corn is extremely nutritious and provides higher yields than most other crops, including wheat. From one kernel of corn a whole corn plant can grow, producing several ears of corn. European settlers depended on corn after their arrival in the Northeast. They were taught to make corn chowder, cornbread, hominy and grits as well as corn-on-the-cob and popped corn. Settlers also fed corn to the animals that were a part of their diet—chickens, turkeys and pigs. Corn also replaced money in the 1630s when the settlers in Massachusetts ran out of silver coins.¹

Since corn was so nutritious, the settlers used to mix some with water and take it with them on long trips. Johnny Cakes, as they are called today, were once called “journey cakes” for this reason. Johnny Cakes are easy to make and taste great with some syrup poured over them!

¹ Jack Weatherford. *Native Roots*. New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1991, p. 114.

How to make Johnny Cakes

1 Cup Stone-Ground Rhode Island Flint Cornmeal (*other cornmeal can be substituted*)

1 Teaspoon Sugar • 1/4 Teaspoon Salt

Boiling Water & Milk

Mix the cornmeal, sugar, and salt in a bowl. Scald the mixture with boiling water and mix well—it should be very thick. Add enough milk to thin the batter to the consistency of mashed potatoes. Drop the batter by tablespoons onto a hot (375°) greased griddle and cook for 10 minutes on each side. Serve the Johnny Cakes hot with butter and maple syrup.

Variation: chocolate chips can be added just before dropping the batter onto the griddle to make chocolate Johnny Cakes.



Harvest Ceremony

BEYOND THE THANKSGIVING MYTH

— a study guide —

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