

## RETHINKING THANKSGIVING CELEBRATIONS

## Native Perspectives on Thanksgiving

The “First Thanksgiving” is often portrayed as a friendly harvest celebration where Pilgrims and generic, nameless Indians came together to eat and give thanks. This story is a myth that was sparked in the mid-1800s when English accounts of the 1621 harvest event resurfaced and fueled the American imagination. Romanticized paintings and stereotypical images of “Pilgrims” and “Indians” celebrating the “First Thanksgiving” became part of the national nostalgia and Manifest Destiny sentiment as the United States pushed west. Sarah Josepha Hale, an influential editor of a magazine called *Godey’s Lady’s Book*, led a campaign for a national Thanksgiving holiday, and the “First Thanksgiving” myth played into her agenda. In 1863, President Abraham Lincoln declared a national Thanksgiving in November to celebrate gratitude and unity amidst the turmoil of the Civil War. In the decades that followed, the “First Thanksgiving” myth and the national holiday evolved into a foundational, national story reinforced by memorials, holiday marketing, literature, and school curriculums.

The “First Thanksgiving” as a national story is incomplete and inaccurate. The whole history is more complex and includes the Wampanoag voice and perspective that have been largely absent from this narrative. The Wampanoag and neighboring Native nations were interacting with European explorers, traders, and enslavers for nearly one hundred years before English settlers arrived at the Wampanoag village of Patuxet in 1620. After careful observation, negotiations, and exchanges, the Wampanoag decided to assist the English settlers. However, their interactions had much more to do with political alliances and diplomacy than a budding friendship. Cooperation and peace were short-lived. To learn more about the true history that goes beyond a shared meal in 1621, see the [Harvest Ceremony: Beyond the Thanksgiving Myth](#) study guide.

Harvest ceremonies and festivals have been an integral part of Wampanoag lifeways for thousands of years. The Wampanoag practiced daily and seasonal traditions of giving thanks long before the encounter with English settlers and the formation of Thanksgiving as a national holiday. Learn the significance of [Cranberry Day](#) for Wampanoag communities as they continue cultural traditions and relationships with their homeland today. Native traditions are distinct, complex, and specific to each individual nation. To gain a deeper understanding of traditional foodways and relationships to homelands for other Native nations, consider the [American Indian Perspectives on Thanksgiving](#) teaching poster for grades 4–8.



Cranberry bog on Aquinnah Wampanoag tribal lands.  
Photo by SmokeSignals

### Try these culturally sensitive resources and activities:

#### Bioneers – [Indigeneity Curriculum](#)

- Thanksgiving Curriculum, Grades K–1
- The Real Thanksgiving, Grades 9–12
- Three Sisters Garden, Grades 7–12

#### Indigenous New Hampshire Collaborative Collective – [Thanksgiving](#)

- Common Thanksgiving Myths
- The Invention of Thanksgiving
- Resources for Parents and Teachers
- Books, Articles, Videos
- Observing the Holiday

#### Grades K–2

[Keepunumuk](#): *Weeâchumun’s Thanksgiving Story* by Danielle Greendeer, Anthony Perry, and Alexis Buntin. Illustrated by Garry Meeches Sr. (Charlesbridge, 2022) [Activities and Discussion](#)

#### Grades 3–5

*If You Lived During the Plimoth Thanksgiving* by Chris Newell. Illustrated by Winona Nelson (Scholastic, 2021)

#### Grades 5–12

*Colonization and the Wampanoag Story* by Linda Coombs (Crown Books for Young Readers, 2023)

For many students, Thanksgiving is a time to express gratitude and to be with family. Giving thanks is a longstanding, central tradition among Indigenous peoples that is still practiced today. Read and discuss the [Haudenosaunee Thanksgiving Address](#) with your students. This expression of gratitude is recited by the Haudenosaunee at community gatherings throughout the year. Recommended children's literature centered around traditions of gratitude and/or seasonal harvests from different Native cultures include:

- *Berry Song* by Michaela Goade (Little, Brown, 2022)
- *Dancing With Our Ancestors* by Sara Florence Davidson and Robert Davidson (Highwater, 2022)
- *The First Blade of Sweetgrass* by Suzanne Greenlaw and Gabriel Frey (Tilbury House, 2021)
- *Giving Thanks: A Native American Good Morning Message* by Chief Jake Swamp (Lee & Low Books, 1997)
- *Greet the Dawn the Lakota Way* by S.D. Nelson (South Dakota Historical Society Press, 2012)
- *Let's Go! A Harvest Story* by Hannah Lindoff (Sealaska Heritage Institute, 2017)
- *Mnoomin maan'gowing / The Gift of Mnoomin* by Brittany Luby (Groundwood Books, 2023)
- *Returning to the Yakoun River* by Sara Florence Davidson and Robert Davidson (Highwater, 2022)
- *Siha Tooskin Knows: The Offering of Tobacco* by Charlene Bearhead and Wilson Bearhead (Highwater, 2020)
- *We Are Grateful: Otsaliheliga* by Traci Sorell (Charlesbridge, 2018; Scholastic, 2020)
- *When the Shadbush Blooms* by Carla Messinger (Lee & Low Books, 2020)

As educators, we should select books and other materials that feature accurate and tribally specific portrayals of Native people, both past and present. NK360 collaborated with Dr. Debbie Reese (Nambé Pueblo) of American Indians in Children's Literature to develop a rubric that outlines five criteria groups to consider when selecting additional [Native American Literature in Your Classroom](#).

Projects and crafts that attempt to adapt or copy Native traditions tend to perpetuate stereotypes of Native cultures. We discourage adopting "Native" costumes or crafts into your classroom. For more information, please see our [Native American Cultures and Clothing: Native American Is Not a Costume](#) guide. Instead, we encourage you to celebrate the vibrancy of Native cultures with some of these resources while you celebrate Thanksgiving.