All About Thanksgiving

Facts checked against museums and the National Archives.

What is Thanksgiving?

Thanksgiving is a holiday in the United States, in late November. Many people share a meal and say thanks for the people and things they appreciate.

How it became a national day

In 1863, President Abraham Lincoln asked the whole country to set aside a day of thanks. Sarah Josepha Hale, a magazine editor, had written for years asking for one. In 1941, Congress made it a yearly holiday.

Giving thanks is old

People around the world have thanked each other and the earth for the harvest for a very long time. Canada has its own Thanksgiving in October.

Thanks all year

Wampanoag people have daily and seasonal ways of giving thanks. For them, thanks is a way of life, not one holiday.

A day of mourning

Some Native people mark the day as a National Day of Mourning. Since 1970 they have gathered each year in Plymouth, Massachusetts, to remember the hard parts of this history.

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Fall 1621: What We Know

A harvest gathering at Plymouth, from English settlers (often called Pilgrims) and Wampanoag people.

What the old letters say

In fall 1621, English settlers at Plymouth held a harvest gathering.

Edward Winslow wrote a letter about it. He said the Wampanoag leader Massasoit came with about ninety men, and that everyone stayed together for three days.

He wrote that the Wampanoag guests hunted and brought five deer, and that the settlers' own hunters caught birds that fed them for almost a week.

What historians aren't sure about

Historians aren't sure whether the Wampanoag were invited. Some say about ninety men came after hearing English guns, and then hunted deer for the gathering.

No one wrote down a full menu. The letters mention deer and wild birds. What else was served is not known.

Some parts of the story you may have heard are myths. Written accounts don't mention Plymouth Rock.



Wampanoag people are still here

Wampanoag people live today in Mashpee, Aquinnah, Assonet, Chappaquiddick and Herring Pond, in Massachusetts and Rhode Island. The Aquinnah Wampanoag still hold Cranberry Day each fall.



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Thanksgiving Quiz

Circle the best answer. The answers are upside down at the bottom.

1. Who asked the whole country to keep a day of thanks in 1863?

a) Theodore Roosevelt
b) Abraham Lincoln
c) John Adams

2. What was Sarah Josepha Hale's job?

a) Ship captain
b) Baker
c) Magazine editor

3. About how many Wampanoag men does Winslow's letter say came in 1621?

a) 9
b) 90
c) 900

4. What does Winslow's letter say the Wampanoag guests hunted?

a) Deer
b) Rabbits
c) Whales

5. Which is true today?

a) Wampanoag people all disappeared long ago
b) Wampanoag people are still here
c) Wampanoag people moved to Canada

6. In which month is Canada's Thanksgiving?

a) July
b) January
c) October

7. What did Congress do in 1941?

a) Moved Thanksgiving to July
b) Set a date for Thanksgiving every year
c) Banned pie

8. Some Native people gather in Plymouth each year for a National Day of what?

a) Mourning
b) Parades
c) Fireworks

Answers: 1 b, 2 c, 3 b, 4 a, 5 b, 6 c, 7 b, 8 a

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