

The First Thanksgiving



The First Thanksgiving 1621, J. L. G. Ferris.

Courtesy of the Library of Congress

Most texts and supplementary materials portray Native Americans at the gathering as supporting players. They are depicted as nameless, faceless, generic Indians” who merely shared a meal with the intrepid Pilgrims. The real story is much deeper, richer, and more nuanced. The Indians in attendance, the Wampanoag, played a lead role in this historic encounter, and they had been essential to the survival of the colonists during the newcomers’ first year. The Wampanoag were a people with a sophisticated society who had occupied the region for thousands of years. They had their own government, their own religious and philosophical beliefs, their own knowledge system, and their own culture. They were also a people for whom giving thanks was a part of daily life.

Here is an excerpt that offers thanks for the food plants:

“With one mind, we turn to honor and thank all the Food Plants we harvest from the garden. Since the beginning of time, the grains, vegetables, beans, and berries have helped the people survive. Many other living things draw strength from them, too. We gather all the Plant Foods together as one and send them a greeting of thanks.”

- Haudenosaunee Thanksgiving Address

Using the portrait as a visual guide, take a look at just a few Native communities through the prism of three main themes that are central to understanding both American Indians and the deeper meaning of the Thanksgiving holiday. The themes are:

- *Environment*: traditional knowledge about and understandings of the natural world.
- *Community*: the role that group identity plays in Native cultures.
- *Encounters*: how interactions between cultures have affected those cultures.

It is within these fundamental areas that we begin to see the innovations and contributions of American Indian peoples to the world at large. The combination of community systems and an understanding of the natural world enabled Native cultures to adapt and change over time—as all cultures do—both before and after encounters with newcomers. By acknowledging this, it is possible to bring a new perspective to the Thanksgiving holiday.

[Source - http://nmai.si.edu/sites/1/files/pdf/education/thanksgiving_poster.pdf]