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Thanksgiving on Plymouth Plantation
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The First Thanksgiving?

If the meal the English shared with the Wampanoag in the fall of 1621 wasn't the first Thanksgiving held on these shores (or wasn't even a Thanksgiving at all), then what was it? It surely took place long before Europeans came to America, when Native people held ceremonies to give thanks for the sun and stars, the wind and rain, the animals and the gift of life.

Claims for the first Thanksgiving in America celebrated by *Europeans* include one held by Ponce de León in Florida back in 1513, and another by Francisco Vázquez de Coronado in the Texas Panhandle in 1541. Others make claims for first Thanksgivings in Newfoundland, El Paso, Maine, and Jamestown. The first *national* day of Thanksgiving, declared by the Continental Congress, was on Thursday, December 18, 1777.

In October of 1863, though "in the midst of a civil war of unequalled magnitude and severity," President Abraham Lincoln still felt there was much the nation should be grateful for. He declared a national day of Thanksgiving to be held on the last Thursday in November. We have been celebrating it ever since.

The 1621 harvest celebration wasn't referred to as the "First Thanksgiving" until 1841, and it wasn't until after 1900 that the story of the Pilgrims peacefully sharing a turkey dinner with the Wampanoag became associated in the American mind with our annual Thanksgiving Day.

To learn more about Plymouth Plantation and the First Thanksgiving, you can visit Plimoth Plantation Inc., a private nonprofit living history museum in Plymouth, Massachusetts – or visit them on the web at www.plimoth.org

—Diane Stanley