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How Many Days Did The First Thanksgiving Last In 1621

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The Enduring Question: How Many Days Did The First Thanksgiving Last In 1621?

Every autumn, families across the United States gather around tables laden with turkey, stuffing, and pumpkin pie to celebrate Thanksgiving. Yet, for all the modern traditions, the original 1621 feast remains shrouded in myth and curiosity. One of the most frequently asked questions is: **How many days did the first Thanksgiving last in 1621?**The answer—three days—is deceptively simple. But to truly understand why this harvest celebration lasted three days, we must explore the people, the context, and the historical records that have shaped our understanding of this iconic event.

The Historical Context of the 1621 Harvest Feast

To answer the question of the festival's duration, we first need to travel back to the autumn of 1621 in Plymouth Colony, Massachusetts. The English settlers, known as the Pilgrims, had endured a devastating first winter. Of the 102 passengers who arrived on the *Mayflower*, barely half survived. Their survival during the following year was due in large part to the assistance of the Wampanoag people, particularly the English-speaking Tisquantum (Squanto).

By the fall of 1621, the colonists had reaped a bountiful harvest. Governor William Bradford declared a time of thanksgiving and feasting—a common practice in England for celebrating good fortune. But this was not a solemn religious observance as we might imagine today; it was a vibrant, communal celebration.

The Only Primary Source: Edward Winslow's Account

Our knowledge of the **first Thanksgiving in 1621** comes primarily from a single letter written by colonist Edward Winslow in December 1621. Published in a pamphlet titled *Mourt's Relation*, Winslow wrote:

This is the definitive evidence that directly answers **how many days did the first Thanksgiving last in 1621**: three days. The phrase "for three days" is unambiguous. It was not a single afternoon meal but an extended festival stretching from morning to night.

Why a Three-Day Celebration?

Understanding **why**the feast lasted three days provides deeper insight into the interplay of English and Wampanoag cultures.

English Harvest Home Traditions

In 17th-century England, harvest festivals often lasted several days. They were times of communal work

followed by communal leisure. The “Harvest Home” celebration typically involved feasting, games, and thanksgiving to God for the crops. A three-day event would not have been unusual for the Pilgrims, who brought these customs across the Atlantic.

Wampanoag Hospitality and Diplomacy

When the Wampanoag leader Massasoit (Ousamequin) arrived with approximately 90 warriors, the scale of the gathering changed dramatically. The English had originally planned a modest feast, but the addition of so many guests necessitated a longer, larger celebration. The Wampanoag, as a gesture of goodwill, contributed five deer to the feast. It is highly likely that the three-day duration was mutually agreed upon to allow proper time for diplomacy, games, and shared meals.

What Transpired During Those Three Days?

While the exact schedule is unknown, historians have pieced together a plausible picture of the activities. The three days were not spent solely at the table.

Day One: Arrival, Feasting, and Diplomacy

Massasoit and his men likely arrived on the first day. After formal greetings, the feast began. The English fired their muskets as a salute and demonstration of military readiness—something Winslow called “exercising our arms.” The massive amount of food prepared for the first day would have included wildfowl (likely ducks, geese, and possibly turkeys), venison, fish, and fresh vegetables such as corn, squash, and beans.

Day Two: Continued Feasting and Games

The second day probably involved more eating, but also recreational activities. The phrase “amongst other recreations” suggests athletic contests. The Wampanoag and English likely engaged in running races, wrestling, and shooting competitions. These games built camaraderie and relieved tension between the two groups.

Day Three: Final Communal Meal and Farewell

The third day featured a final large meal, the distribution of leftover food, and the departure of Massasoit and his people. The celebration concluded with mutual respect and the establishment of an alliance that would last for decades.

Debunking Common Myths About the 1621 Thanksgiving Duration

Despite clear historical evidence, several misconceptions persist about **how many days did the first Thanksgiving last in 1621**.

Myth: It Was a Single Day of Prayer

Many people mistakenly believe the first Thanksgiving was a religious day of prayer. In fact, the Pilgrims held separate days of thanksgiving for prayer. The 1621 harvest feast was a secular, joyful gathering. Governor Bradford actually had to cancel any prayer services because the feast was so large and lively.

Myth: The Feast Only Lasted One Afternoon

This myth likely arises from modern Thanksgiving, which is usually a single meal. But Winslow’s account explicitly states “three days.” The logistics of preparing and consuming that much food for 140 people would have required multiple days.

Myth: Turkey Was the Main Course

While wild turkey was likely present, it was not the star. Venison from the Wampanoag’s five deer and various waterfowl were more prominent. The feast was a diverse spread, not a turkey-centric meal.

The Menu: What Did They Eat Over Three Days?

Modern Thanksgiving menus are relatively predictable, but the 1621 feast was a seasonal, local affair. Here is what historians believe was available over the three-day celebration:

- Venison: Five deer brought by the Wampanoag.
- Wildfowl: Ducks, geese, swans, and possibly turkeys (the Pilgrims used the word “fowl” generally).
- Seafood: Cod, bass, clams, mussels, and lobster (though lobster was considered a low-status food).
- Grains and Vegetables: Corn (prepared as porridge or bread), squash, pumpkins, beans, and possibly peas.
- Fruits: Wild plums, grapes, and dried berries.
- Beverages: Water, beer (brewed from corn), and possibly small amounts of wine.

Notably absent were potatoes (not yet introduced to North America), sweet potatoes, cranberry sauce (sugar was scarce), and pumpkin pie (no ovens or butter). The three days of eating would have been heavy on protein and relatively light on sweets.

The Number of Attendees: Why Three Days Were Necessary

The size of the gathering is crucial to understanding **how many days did the first Thanksgiving last in 1621**. Approximately 50 English colonists participated (all who had survived, including women and children). Massasoit arrived with about 90 Wampanoag men, making a total of roughly 140 people. Feeding such a crowd required extensive preparation. Women began cooking days in advance. The three-day format allowed for staggered cooking times, rest, and cleanup.

Logistics of a 17th-Century Feast

Without modern refrigeration, cooking fires had to be maintained constantly. Meat was roasted on spits, boiled in large kettles, or baked in buried pits. The three-day duration meant that food could be cooked in batches and consumed fresh. Leftovers were not wasted; they were shared or preserved.

What Happened After Those Three Days?

The conclusion of the three-day feast did not mark the end of the relationship between the Pilgrims and the Wampanoag. The alliance formed during the celebration was reinforced over the coming years. Notably, no “second Thanksgiving” occurred in 1622 because a poor harvest and a drought made celebration impossible. The idea of an annual Thanksgiving holiday did not emerge until much later—President Abraham Lincoln declared it a national holiday in 1863. However, the three-day harvest festival of 1621 remains the symbolic origin.

Why Does the Duration Matter Today?

Understanding **how many days did the first Thanksgiving last in 1621** helps us appreciate the true nature of the event. It was not a bland, one-day ritual but a vibrant, cross-cultural celebration that exemplified cooperation and gratitude. The three days reflect the communal effort and the respect between two very different groups of people. In an era of fast-paced holidays, remembering the lengthy, deliberate celebration invites us to slow down and savor our own time with loved ones.

Conclusion

To answer the central question directly: **The first Thanksgiving in 1621 lasted three days**. This duration was documented by eyewitness Edward Winslow and reflects the combination of English harvest customs and Wampanoag hospitality. Over those three days, the Plymouth colonists and Massasoit’s people shared food,

games, and friendship, forging an alliance that would shape early American history. So the next time you sit down for your Thanksgiving meal, remember that you are partaking in a tradition that once stretched from sunrise to sunset for three glorious autumn days.

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