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The First Thanksgiving Lasted How Many Days In 1621

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The First Thanksgiving Lasted How Many Days In 1621

Every autumn, as families gather around tables laden with turkey, stuffing, and cranberry sauce, many of us pause to reflect on the origins of this cherished tradition. The story of the First Thanksgiving is often taught in elementary schools as a simple tale of Pilgrims and Native Americans sharing a festive meal. But when we dig deeper into historical records, we discover that the 1621 harvest celebration was far more complex—and significantly longer—than a single afternoon dinner. So, **the First Thanksgiving lasted how many days in 1621?**The answer is three days. This three-day feast, held sometime between late September and early November of 1621, was a sprawling, outdoor harvest festival that involved the Plymouth colonists and the Wampanoag people. Understanding the length and nature of this gathering helps us appreciate the cultural significance behind the modern holiday.

The Historical Context of the 1621 Harvest Celebration

Before we discuss the duration of the feast, it is essential to understand the circumstances that led to this event. The Pilgrims—English Separatists who had fled religious persecution—arrived aboard the Mayflower in December 1620. Their first winter in the New World was brutal; nearly half the colony perished from disease, starvation, and exposure. By the spring of 1621, the surviving settlers were in desperate need of assistance. That help came from the Wampanoag Confederacy, particularly from an English-speaking Patuxet man named Tisquantum (often known as Squanto) and the sachem Massasoit. Through a mutual defense agreement, the two groups formed a fragile alliance that allowed the Pilgrims to plant crops, fish, and hunt on Wampanoag lands. By autumn, thanks to abundant harvests of corn, barley, and peas, the colonists had enough food to sustain themselves through the coming winter. In gratitude and perhaps as a diplomatic gesture, Governor William Bradford declared a harvest festival to celebrate the bounty—and invited the Wampanoag to join them.

Who Attended and Why

The guest list was not merely social; it was political and strategic. According to primary sources, Massasoit arrived with approximately 90 Wampanoag men. This was not a small family gathering but a sizable delegation. The Pilgrims themselves numbered only about 50 of the original 102 passengers by the fall of 1621. With roughly 140 people in attendance, the event required massive amounts of food and a flexible schedule. The Wampanoag contribution was significant: they brought five deer to the feast, along with wild game and fish. The original purpose of the gathering was to celebrate the autumn harvest, a common practice in both English and Native American cultures. However, given the political context, it also served as a reaffirmation of the alliance between the colonists and the Wampanoag. The three-day length allowed ample time for diplomacy, games, and communal cooking, far exceeding the scope of a typical modern Thanksgiving dinner.

Duration of the Feast: The First Thanksgiving Lasted How Many Days in 1621?

The definitive answer comes from an eyewitness account written by Edward Winslow, a Pilgrim leader. In a letter dated December 12, 1621, Winslow described the event: "our harvest being gotten in, our governor sent four men on fowling, that so we might after a special manner rejoice together after we had gathered the fruit of our labors… And although it be not always so plentiful as it was at this time with us, yet by the goodness of God, we are so far from want that we often wish you partakers of our plenty." He continued, "we entertained [Massasoit] and his men for three days." That explicit phrase—"three days"—confirms that **the First Thanksgiving lasted how many days in 1621**is three, and it was a continuous celebration, not a single meal. This extended period allowed the two groups to share food, participate in games (such as running races and shooting contests in the English style), and strengthen their alliance. It was a true festival, reminiscent of the English harvest home traditions mixed with Native American thanksgiving ceremonies that could last several days.

What We Know from Primary Sources

The most reliable insight into the three-day event comes from Edward Winslow's letter, published in a 1622 pamphlet titled "Mourt's Relation." Winslow wrote in detail about the abundance of wild fowl—likely ducks, geese, and possibly turkeys—but he never specifically mentioned "turkey" as the centerpiece. He noted the five deer brought by the Wampanoag and referred to "the fruits of our labors," which included harvested crops. Another primary source, William Bradford's later history "Of Plymouth Plantation," mentions the festivities only briefly, confirming the gathering but not the exact length. However, Winslow’s firsthand account remains the cornerstone for historians. The letter does not specify the exact calendar dates, but scholars estimate the harvest celebration occurred between September 21 and November 11, 1621, aligning with the traditional English harvest festival which often spanned several days. The lack of precise dates underscores the fact that the event was not called "Thanksgiving" at the time; it was simply a harvest celebration. The name "First Thanksgiving" was applied retroactively in the 19th century.

The Menu: What Was Eaten?

To grasp the scale of a three-day feast for 140 people, we must consider the food sources available. The Pilgrims had grown corn, barley, and peas, though the barley harvest was used for beer rather than bread. They also had wild game from hunting expeditions. Edward Winslow wrote of "fowl" in great abundance; this likely included ducks, geese, and possibly passenger pigeons. Venison from the Wampanoag’s five deer was a major protein source. Seafood played a role too: cod, bass, clams, and eels were abundant along the coast. Vegetables might have included onions, beans, pumpkin or squash (likely boiled or roasted), and the corn was probably ground into porridge or grits. Cranberries may have been available but not as a sweet sauce—sugar was scarce. The meal was cooked over open fires, with no ovens for baking pies or cakes. The absence of modern Thanksgiving staples like mashed potatoes (potatoes not yet introduced to the region), pumpkin pie (no butter or wheat flour for crust), and stuffing (no onions or herbs for bread stuffing) highlights how different the menu was. Yet the sheer quantity of food required for three days of continuous feasting indicates a celebration of abundance.

Common Myths About the First Thanksgiving

Understanding the true duration helps debunk several persistent myths. The most common misconception is that the Pilgrims and Wampanoag sat down for a single, peaceful meal on a fixed day in November. Instead, it was a three-day outdoor event with games, hunting, and communal food preparation. Let’s explore two major myths.

Myth: It Was a Religious Thanksgiving

For the Pilgrims, a "Thanksgiving" was a religious day of prayer and fasting, not feasting. The 1621 harvest celebration was a secular harvest festival, called "rejoicing" by Winslow. The first official religious Thanksgiving in Plymouth colony did not occur until 1623, after a drought broke. Therefore, the three-day gathering we now call the First Thanksgiving was not a religious observance. It was a civil celebration of the harvest bounty, combined with political alliance-building. The fact that it lasted three days emphasizes its festive, non-religious nature.

Myth: Turkey Was the Main Course

While wild turkeys were present in New England, Winslow specifically mentioned "fowl" in general. He did not single out turkey. The Wampanoag brought venison, which likely featured prominently. Ducks and geese were more common in the region and easier to hunt in large numbers. The modern emphasis on turkey came from later New England traditions, popularized by authors like Sarah Josepha Hale in the 19th century. So, during those three days, the main protein was probably venison and waterfowl rather than turkey. This realization does not diminish the historical importance of the feast but corrects a romanticized image.

Why the Three-Day Duration Matters

The length of the celebration—three days—is not a trivial detail. It reflects the cultural practices of both the English and the Wampanoag. In England, harvest festivals often lasted several days, with games, bonfires, and community meals. Among the Wampanoag, thanksgiving ceremonies (called "Nickommo") could also extend over multiple days, involving feasting, dancing, and giving thanks to the Great Spirit. The three-day format allowed both cultures to engage in their own traditions while sharing food and diplomacy. It also meant that the event was far more interactive than a sit-down dinner; there was time for the Wampanoag to demonstrate their hunting skills, for the Pilgrims to showcase their muskets, and for both groups to negotiate future cooperation. Recognizing **the First Thanksgiving lasted how many days in 1621** helps us appreciate that this was a dynamic, cross-cultural exchange—not a single meal frozen in time.

Evolution into a National Holiday

The three-day, 1621 harvest celebration did not immediately become an annual tradition. It was not until 1863 that President Abraham Lincoln declared Thanksgiving a national holiday, largely thanks to the campaign of magazine editor Sarah Josepha Hale. She drew inspiration from New England harvest festivals and idealized the 1621 event as a model of unity. The idea of a single day of Thanksgiving became codified in the 20th century, with the fourth Thursday of November established by Congress in 1941. As the holiday grew in popularity, the three-day length of the original event was largely forgotten. Schools and popular culture simplified the story into a one-day feast. Revisiting the historical record allows us to reclaim a richer narrative: the First Thanksgiving was not a compact meal, but a multi-day festival of survival, diplomacy, and cross-cultural cooperation. This understanding can enrich our modern celebrations, reminding us that gratitude often requires time and communal effort.

Conclusion

When someone asks, **the first Thanksgiving lasted how many days in 1621**, the accurate answer is three days. This extended period of feasting, games, and alliance-building between the Plymouth colonists and the Wampanoag confederacy set the stage for a story far more nuanced than the simple tale of Pilgrims and Indians sharing turkey. By recognizing the duration and context, we honor the actual people who participated: the resilient English settlers and the generous Wampanoag hosts who gathered for three days to celebrate a fragile peace and a bountiful harvest. As you prepare for your own Thanksgiving, consider setting aside more

than a single meal—perhaps a weekend of gratitude, reflection, and community, mirroring the three-day spirit of 1621.

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