



 iloveancestry.com  Facebook.com/iloveancestry  [@LovingAncestry](https://Twitter.com/LovingAncestry)

INTRODUCTION FOR TEACHERS "Thanksgiving"

By Chuck Larsen

This is a particularly difficult introduction to write. I have been a public schools teacher for twelve years, and I am also a historian and have written several books on American and Native American history. I also just happen to be Quebeque French, Metis, Ojibwa, and Iroquois. Because my Indian ancestors were on both sides of the struggle between the Puritans and the New England Indians and I am well versed in my cultural heritage and history both as an Anishnabeg (Algokin) and Hodenosione (Iroquois), it was felt that I could bring a unique insight to the project.

For an Indian, who is also a school teacher, Thanksgiving was never an easy holiday for me to deal with in class. I sometimes have felt like I learned too much about "the Pilgrims and the Indians." Every year I have been faced with the professional and moral dilemma of just how to be honest and informative with my children at Thanksgiving without passing on historical distortions, and racial and cultural stereotypes.

The problem is that part of what you and I learned in our own childhood about the "Pilgrims" and "Squanto" and the "First Thanksgiving" is a mixture of both history and myth. But the THEME of Thanksgiving has truth and integrity far above and beyond what we and our forebearers have made of it. Thanksgiving is a bigger concept than just the story of the founding of the Plymouth Plantation.

So what do we teach to our children? We usually pass on unquestioned what we all received in our own childhood classrooms. I have come to know both the truths and the myths about our "First Thanksgiving," and I feel we need to try to reach beyond the myths to some degree of historic truth. This text is an attempt to do this.

At this point you are probably asking, "What is the big deal about Thanksgiving and the Pilgrims?" "What does this guy mean by a mixture of truths and myth?" That is just what this introduction is all about. I propose that there may be a good deal that many of us do not know about our Thanksgiving holiday and also about the "First Thanksgiving" story. I also propose that what most of us have learned about the Pilgrims and the Indians who were at the first Thanksgiving at Plymouth Plantation is only part of the truth. When you build a lesson on only half of the information, then you are not teaching the whole truth. That is why I used the word myth. So where do you start to find out more about the holiday and our modern stories about how it began?

A good place to start is with a very important book, "The Invasion of America," by Francis Jennings. It is a very authoritative text on the settlement of New England and the evolution of Indian/White relations in the New England colonies. I also recommend looking up any good text on British history. Check out the British Civil War of 1621-1642, Oliver Cromwell, and the Puritan uprising of 1653 which ended parliamentary government in England until 1660. The history of the Puritan experience in New England really should not be separated from the history of the Puritan experience in England. You should also realize that the "Pilgrims" were a sub sect, or splinter group, of the Puritan movement. They came to America to achieve on this continent what their Puritan brethren continued to strive for in England; and when the Puritans were forced from England, they came to New England and soon absorbed the original "Pilgrims."

As the editor, I have read all the texts listed in our bibliography, and many more, in preparing this material for you. I want you to read some of these books. So let me use my editorial license to deliberately provoke you a little. When comparing the events stirred on by the Puritans in England with accounts of Puritan/Pilgrim activities in New England in the same era, several provocative things suggest themselves:

1. The Puritans were not just simple religious conservatives persecuted by the King and the Church of England for their unorthodox beliefs. They were political revolutionaries who not only intended to overthrow the government of England, but who actually did so in 1649
2. The Puritan "Pilgrims" who came to New England were not simply refugees who decided to "put their fate in God's hands" in the "empty wilderness" of North America, as a generation of Hollywood movies taught us. In any culture at any time, settlers on a frontier are most often outcasts and fugitives who, in some way or other, do not fit into the mainstream of their society. This is not to imply that people who settle on frontiers have no redeeming qualities such as bravery, etc., but that the images of nobility that we associate with the Puritans are at least in part the good "P.R." efforts of later writers who have romanticized them.(1) It is also very plausible that this unnaturally noble image of the Puritans is all wrapped up with the mythology of "Noble Civilization" vs. "Savagery."(2) At any rate, mainstream Englishmen considered the Pilgrims to be deliberate religious dropouts who intended to found a new nation completely independent from non-Puritan England. In 1643 the Puritan/Pilgrims declared themselves an independent confederacy, one hundred and forty-three years before the American Revolution. They believed in the imminent occurrence of Armageddon in Europe and hoped to establish here in the new world the "Kingdom of God" foretold in the book of Revelation. They diverged from their Puritan brethren who remained in England only in that they held little real hope of ever being able to successfully overthrow the King and Parliament

and, thereby, impose their "Rule of Saints" (strict Puritan orthodoxy) on the rest of the British people. So they came to America not just in one ship (the Mayflower) but in a hundred others as well, with every intention of taking the land away from its native people to build their prophesied "Holy Kingdom."(3)

3. The Pilgrims were not just innocent refugees from religious persecution. They were victims of bigotry in England, but some of them were themselves religious bigots by our modern standards. The Puritans and the Pilgrims saw themselves as the "Chosen Elect" mentioned in the book of Revelation. They strove to "purify" first themselves and then everyone else of everything they did not accept in their own interpretation of scripture. Later New England Puritans used any means, including deceptions, treachery, torture, war, and genocide to achieve that end.(4) They saw themselves as fighting a holy war against Satan, and everyone who disagreed with them was the enemy. This rigid fundamentalism was transmitted to America by the Plymouth colonists, and it sheds a very different light on the "Pilgrim" image we have of them. This is best illustrated in the written text of the Thanksgiving sermon delivered at Plymouth in 1623 by "Mather the Elder." In it, Mather the Elder gave special thanks to God for the devastating plague of smallpox which wiped out the majority of the Wampanoag Indians who had been their benefactors. He praised God for destroying "chiefly young men and children, the very seeds of increase, thus clearing the forests to make way for a better growth", i.e., the Pilgrims.(5) In as much as these Indians were the Pilgrim's benefactors, and Squanto, in particular, was the instrument of their salvation that 1st year, how are we to interpret this apparent callousness towards their misfortune

4. The Wampanoag Indians were not the "friendly savages" some of us were told about when we were in the primary grades. Nor were they invited out of the goodness of the Pilgrims' hearts to share the fruits of the Pilgrims' harvest in a demonstration of Christian charity and interracial brotherhood. The Wampanoag were members of a widespread confederacy of Algonkian-speaking peoples known as the League of the Delaware. For six hundred years they had been defending themselves from my other ancestors, the Iroquois, and for the last hundred years they had also had encounters with European fishermen and explorers but especially with European slavers, who had been raiding their coastal villages.(6)They knew something of the power of the white people, and they did not fully trust them. But their religion taught that they were to give charity to the helpless and hospitality to anyone who came to them with empty hands.(7) Also, Squanto, the Indian hero of the Thanksgiving story, had a very real love for a British explorer named John Weymouth, who had become a second father to him several years before the Pilgrims arrived at Plymouth. Clearly, Squanto saw these Pilgrims as Weymouth's people.(8) To the Pilgrims the Indians were heathens and, therefore, the natural instruments of the Devil. Squanto, as the only educated and baptized Christian among the Wampanoag, was seen as merely an instrument of God, set in the wilderness to provide for the survival of His chosen people, the Pilgrims. The Indians were comparatively powerful and, therefore,

dangerous; and they were to be courted until the next ships arrived with more Pilgrim colonists and the balance of power shifted. The Wampanoag were actually invited to that Thanksgiving feast for the purpose of negotiating a treaty that would secure the lands of the Plymouth Plantation for the Pilgrims. It should also be noted that the INDIANS, possibly out of a sense of charity toward their hosts, ended up bringing the majority of the food for the feast.(9)

5. A generation later, after the balance of power had indeed shifted, the Indian and White children of that Thanksgiving were striving to kill each other in the genocidal conflict known as King Philip's War. At the end of that conflict most of the New England Indians were either exterminated or refugees among the French in Canada, or they were sold into slavery in the Carolinas by the Puritans. So successful was this early trade in Indian slaves that several Puritan ship owners in Boston began the practice of raiding the Ivory Coast of Africa for black slaves to sell to the proprietary colonies of the South, thus founding the American-based slave trade.(10)
6. Obviously there is a lot more to the story of Indian/Puritan relations in New England than in the thanksgiving stories we heard as children. Our contemporary mix of myth and history about the "First" Thanksgiving at Plymouth developed in the 1890s and early 1900s. Our country was desperately trying to pull together its many diverse peoples into a common national identity. To many writers and educators at the end of the last century and the beginning of this one, this also meant having a common national history. This was the era of the "melting pot" theory of social progress, and public education was a major tool for social unity. It was with this in mind that the federal government declared the last Thursday in November as the legal holiday of Thanksgiving in 1898.

In consequence, what started as an inspirational bit of New England folklore, soon grew into the full-fledged American Thanksgiving we now know. It emerged complete with stereotyped Indians and stereotyped Whites, incomplete history, and a mythical significance as our "First Thanksgiving." But was it really our FIRST American Thanksgiving?

Now that I have deliberately provoked you with some new information and different opinions, please take the time to read some of the texts in our bibliography. I want to encourage you to read further and form your own opinions. There really is a TRUE Thanksgiving story of Plymouth Plantation. But I strongly suggest that there always has been a Thanksgiving story of some kind or other for as long as there have been human beings. There was also a "First" Thanksgiving in America, but it was celebrated thirty thousand years ago.(11) At some time during the New Stone Age (beginning about ten thousand years ago) Thanksgiving became associated with giving thanks to God for the harvests of the land. Thanksgiving has always been a time of people coming together, so thanks has also been offered for that gift of fellowship between us all. Every last Thursday in November we now partake in one of the OLDEST and most UNIVERSAL of human celebrations, and THERE ARE MANY THANKSGIVING STORIES TO TELL.

As for Thanksgiving week at Plymouth Plantation in 1621, the friendship was guarded and not always sincere, and the peace was very soon abused. But for three days in New England's history, peace and friendship were there.

So here is a story for your children. It is as kind and gentle a balance of historic truth and positive inspiration as its writers and this editor can make it out to be. I hope it will adequately serve its purpose both for you and your students, and I also hope this work will encourage you to look both deeper and farther, for Thanksgiving is Thanksgiving all around the world.

Chuck Larsen Tacoma Public Schools September, 1986

FOOTNOTES FOR TEACHER

(1) See Berkhofer, Jr., R.F., "The White Man's Indian," references to Puritans, pp. 27, 80-85, 90, 104, & 130.

(2) See Berkhofer, Jr., R.F., "The White Man's Indian," references to frontier concepts of savagery in index. Also see Jennings, Francis, "The Invasion of America," the myth of savagery, pp. 6-12, 15-16, & 109-110.

(3) See Blitzer, Charles, "Age of Kings," Great Ages of Man series, references to Puritanism, pp. 141, 144 & 145-46. Also see Jennings, Francis, "The Invasion of America," references to Puritan human motives, pp. 4-6, 43-44 and 53.

(4) See "Chronicles of American Indian Protest," pp. 6-10. Also see Armstrong, Virginia I., "I Have Spoken," reference to Cannonchet and his village, p. 6. Also see Jennings, Francis, "The Invasion of America," Chapter 9 "Savage War," Chapter 13 "We must Burn Them," and Chapter 17 "Outrage Bloody and Barbarous."

(5) See "Chronicles of American Indian Protest," pp. 6-9. Also see Berkhofer, Jr., R.F., "The White Man's Indian," the comments of Cotton Mather, pp. 37 & 82-83.

(6) See Larsen, Charles M., "The Real Thanksgiving," pp. 3-4. Also see Graff, Steward and Polly Ann, "Squanto, Indian Adventurer." Also see "Handbook of North American Indians," Vol. 15, the reference to Squanto on p. 82.

(7) See Benton-Banai, Edward, "The Mishomis Book," as a reference on general "Anishinabe" (the Algonkin speaking peoples) religious beliefs and practices. Also see Larsen, Charles M., "The Real Thanksgiving," reference to religious life on p. 1.

(8) See Graff, Stewart and Polly Ann, "Squanto, Indian Adventurer." Also see Larsen, Charles M., "The Real Thanksgiving." Also see Bradford, Sir William, "Of Plymouth Plantation," and "Mourt's Relation."

(9) See Larsen, Charles M., "The Real Thanksgiving," the letter of Edward Winslow dated 1622, pp. 5-6.

(10) See "Handbook of North American Indians," Vol. 15, pp. 177-78. Also see "Chronicles of American Indian Protest," p. 9, the reference to the enslavement of King Philip's family. Also see Larsen, Charles, M., "The Real Thanksgiving," pp. 8-11, "Destruction of the Massachusetts Indians."

(11) Best current estimate of the first entry of people into the Americas confirmed by archaeological evidence that is datable.