

The Roots of Thanksgiving

Union of Saints

Native American, Acadian, and European Harvest Traditions

Native American Harvest Traditions

Long before European contact, many Native American nations throughout North America held harvest celebrations and ceremonies of thanksgiving. Although customs varied among tribes, giving thanks for the harvest was a common seasonal tradition. These ceremonies reflected gratitude for the Creator, the natural world, and the blessings that sustained their communities.

Many Native American harvest celebrations included giving thanks to the Creator or Great Spirit, honoring the earth, rivers, forests, plants, and animals, and celebrating successful harvests. Families and communities gathered to share food, sing, dance, tell stories, and offer prayers of gratitude. These traditions also looked forward with hope for future harvests and the continued well being of their people.

Many Eastern Woodlands peoples cultivated corn, beans, and squash, commonly known as the Three Sisters. These crops formed the foundation of many harvest celebrations and played an essential role in both daily life and cultural traditions. Harvest ceremonies often recognized the importance of these crops and the relationship between people and the land.

Examples of Native American harvest traditions include the Haudenosaunee Green Corn Ceremony and Thanksgiving Address, Wampanoag seasonal harvest celebrations, Cherokee Green Corn ceremonies, and Pueblo harvest dances and ceremonies. Although each nation observed its own customs, the common themes of gratitude, community, and stewardship were widespread. Harvest celebrations had existed across North America for centuries before European settlement.

Acadian Harvest Traditions

The Acadians, who settled in present day Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and Prince Edward Island, also maintained longstanding harvest traditions. Their communities depended heavily upon farming, particularly the fertile marshlands they reclaimed through an extensive system of dikes. Successful harvests were essential to the survival and prosperity of Acadian communities.

Harvest celebrations commonly included giving thanks to God, attending Catholic Mass, sharing meals with extended family and neighbors, helping one another harvest crops, and enjoying music, dancing, and community gatherings. Rather than observing one national Thanksgiving holiday, gratitude was woven into the Acadian agricultural calendar and Catholic religious life. These celebrations reflected both faith and the importance of cooperation within rural communities.

Following the Great Expulsion of 1755, Acadian communities continued these traditions wherever they resettled, including New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, Québec, and Louisiana. Despite displacement and hardship, many Acadian families preserved their harvest customs and

religious practices. Today, Canadian Acadians generally celebrate Canadian Thanksgiving in October, while Acadian descendants in the United States celebrate American Thanksgiving in November alongside other Americans.

The Wabanaki and the Acadians

Historical evidence demonstrates that the Wabanaki peoples and the Acadians maintained one of the most cooperative relationships between Indigenous peoples and European settlers in northeastern North America. The Wabanaki Confederacy includes the Mi'kmaq, Wolastoqiyik (Maliseet), Passamaquoddy, Penobscot, and Abenaki nations. Their relationships with Acadian communities often included cooperation, diplomacy, and mutual assistance.

These communities frequently traded goods, shared agricultural knowledge, exchanged hunting and fishing techniques, assisted one another during periods of hardship, formed military alliances in response to outside conflicts, and intermarried in some communities. The Mi'kmaq, in particular, taught Acadian settlers valuable knowledge about local agriculture, fishing, transportation, and survival in the Maritime environment. These exchanges contributed to strong cultural and economic relationships in many regions.

Both the Wabanaki and the Acadians observed harvest celebrations and expressed gratitude. The Wabanaki celebrated successful harvests through ceremonies honoring the Creator, the earth, crops, fish, wildlife, family, and community. The Acadians celebrated successful harvests through church services, prayers, and communal meals expressing gratitude to God.

Although historians have not identified evidence of a formal annual joint Thanksgiving comparable to the modern holiday, the close relationships between many Wabanaki and Acadian communities make it likely that shared meals and seasonal celebrations occurred in areas where the two peoples lived together. These gatherings would have reflected the customs and traditions of the communities involved rather than a nationally recognized holiday. Their shared history continues to be an important part of the heritage of Atlantic Canada and the Wabanaki homeland.

The 1621 Harvest Feast

The harvest gathering at Plymouth in 1621 remains one of the best known events associated with Thanksgiving. Following a successful harvest, English settlers shared a multi day feast with members of the Wampanoag. The gathering has become an important symbol in the history of Thanksgiving, although it represented only one event within a much broader tradition of harvest celebrations.

The meal likely included wild fowl, venison, fish and shellfish, corn, squash, and other locally available foods. These foods reflected both the local environment and the contributions of the Wampanoag, who possessed extensive knowledge of the region. The gathering emphasized hospitality, cooperation, and the successful completion of the harvest season.

This gathering was not originally called "Thanksgiving." Instead, it was one harvest celebration among many occurring throughout the Atlantic world. The English colonists more commonly reserved the word "thanksgiving" for special religious days devoted to prayer and worship.

Thanksgiving Becomes a National Holiday

Over time, harvest traditions evolved into a national observance. Various leaders and citizens promoted the idea of setting aside a day dedicated to gratitude and reflection. Their efforts gradually shaped Thanksgiving into the holiday recognized today.

Important milestones include President George Washington's 1789 proclamation of a national day of thanksgiving, Sarah Josepha Hale's nineteenth century campaign for a permanent national holiday, President Abraham Lincoln's 1863 Thanksgiving proclamation during the Civil War, and Congress establishing Thanksgiving as the fourth Thursday of November in 1941. Together, these events helped create a lasting national tradition. Today, Thanksgiving is observed throughout the United States as a federal holiday centered on gratitude, family, and community.

Conclusion

Thanksgiving has a richer history than a single meal or a single historical event. Native American nations celebrated harvests and gave thanks to the Creator long before European arrival. Acadian communities maintained harvest traditions rooted in Catholic faith and rural agricultural life, while European harvest festivals likewise reflected longstanding traditions of gratitude for the abundance of the season.

The relationships between the Wabanaki peoples and the Acadians demonstrate that cooperation, shared knowledge, and mutual assistance were significant parts of early northeastern North American history. Their interactions illustrate how neighboring communities could build relationships through trade, agriculture, diplomacy, and shared experiences. These connections remain an important part of the historical record of Atlantic Canada.

Modern Thanksgiving is therefore best understood as a holiday shaped by multiple traditions. At its heart, the enduring themes remain gratitude, community, generosity, faith, family, and appreciation for the blessings of the harvest. Although individual customs have evolved over time, the practice of giving thanks continues to unite people across many cultures and generations.