

RETHINKING THANKSGIVING CELEBRATIONS

Native Perspectives on Thanksgiving

The “First Thanksgiving” is often portrayed as a friendly harvest celebration where Pilgrims and generic, nameless Indians came together to eat and give thanks. This story is a myth that was sparked in the mid-1800s when English accounts of the 1621 harvest event resurfaced and fueled the American imagination. Romanticized paintings and stereotypical images of “Pilgrims” and “Indians” celebrating the “First Thanksgiving” became part of the national nostalgia and Manifest Destiny sentiment as the United States pushed west. Sarah Josepha Hale, an influential editor of a magazine called *Godey’s Lady’s Book*, led a campaign for a national Thanksgiving holiday, and the “First Thanksgiving” myth played into her agenda. In 1863, President Abraham Lincoln declared a national Thanksgiving in November to celebrate gratitude and unity amidst the turmoil of the Civil War. In the decades that followed, the “First Thanksgiving” myth and the national holiday evolved into a foundational, national story reinforced by memorials, holiday marketing, literature, and school curriculums.

The “First Thanksgiving” as a national story is incomplete and inaccurate. The whole history is more complex and includes the Wampanoag voice and perspective that have been largely absent from this narrative. The Wampanoag and neighboring Native nations were interacting with European explorers, traders, and enslavers for nearly one hundred years before English settlers arrived at the Wampanoag village of Patuxet in 1620. After careful observation, negotiations, and exchanges, the Wampanoag decided to assist the English settlers. However, their interactions had much more to do with political alliances and diplomacy than a budding friendship. Cooperation and peace were short-lived. To learn more about the true history that goes beyond a shared meal in 1621, see our inquiry-based resource [The “First Thanksgiving”: How Can We Tell a Better Story?](#) for grades 3–5.

Harvest ceremonies and festivals have been an integral part of Wampanoag lifeways for thousands of years. The Wampanoag practiced daily and seasonal traditions of giving thanks long before the encounter with English settlers and the formation of Thanksgiving as a national holiday. Learn the significance of [Cranberry Day](#) for the Aquinnah Wampanoag and the importance of harvest traditions among Wampanoag communities today.

Giving thanks is a longstanding, central tradition among Indigenous peoples that is still practiced today. Native traditions are distinct, complex, and specific to each individual nation. Read and discuss the [Haudenosaunee Thanksgiving Address](#) with your students. This expression of gratitude is recited by the Haudenosaunee at



Cranberry bog on Aquinnah Wampanoag tribal lands.
Photo by SmokeSygnals

Try these culturally sensitive resources and activities:

Bioneers – [Indigeneity Curriculum](#)

- Thanksgiving Curriculum, Grades K–1
- The Real Thanksgiving, Grades 9–12
- Three Sisters Garden, Grades 7–12

Grades K–2

Keepunumuk: Weeâchumun’s Thanksgiving Story by Danielle Greendeer, Anthony Perry, and Alexis Bunten. Illustrated by Garry Meeches Sr. (Charlesbridge, 2022) [Activities and Discussion](#)

Grades 3–5

If You Lived During the Plimoth Thanksgiving by Chris Newell. Illustrated by Winona Nelson (Scholastic, 2021)

Grades 5–12

Colonization and the Wampanoag Story by Linda Coombs (Crown Books for Young Readers, 2023)

community gatherings throughout the year. Recommended children's literature centered around traditions of gratitude and/or seasonal harvests from different Native cultures include:

- *Berry Song* by Michaela Goade (Little, Brown, 2022)
- *Dancing With Our Ancestors* by Sara Florence Davidson and Robert Davidson (Highwater, 2022)
- *The First Blade of Sweetgrass* by Suzanne Greenlaw and Gabriel Frey (Tilbury House, 2021)
- *Giving Thanks: A Native American Good Morning Message* by Chief Jake Swamp (Lee & Low Books, 1997)
- *Greet the Dawn the Lakota Way* by S.D. Nelson (South Dakota Historical Society Press, 2012)
- *Let's Go! A Harvest Story* by Hannah Lindoff (Sealaska Heritage Institute, 2017)
- *Mary's Wild Winter Feast* by Hannah Lindoff (University of Alaska Press, 2014)
- *Mnoomin maan'gowing / The Gift of Mnoomin* by Brittany Luby (Groundwood Books, 2023)
- *Returning to the Yakoun River* by Sara Florence Davidson and Robert Davidson (Highwater, 2022)
- *Siha Tooskin Knows: The Offering of Tobacco* by Charlene Bearhead and Wilson Bearhead (Highwater, 2020)
- *Stand Like a Cedar* by Nicola I. Campbell (Highwater, 2021)
- *We Are Grateful: Otsaliheliga* by Traci Sorell (Charlesbridge, 2018; Scholastic, 2020)
- *When the Shadbush Blooms* by Carla Messinger (Lee & Low Books, 2020)

As educators, we should select books and other materials that feature accurate and tribally specific portrayals of Native people, both past and present. NK360° collaborated with Dr. Debbie Reese (Nambé Pueblo) of American Indians in Children's Literature to develop a rubric that outlines five criteria groups to consider when selecting additional [Native American Literature in Your Classroom](#).

Projects and crafts that attempt to adapt or copy Native traditions often perpetuate stereotypes and misunderstandings of Native cultures. We discourage adopting "Native" costumes or crafts into your classroom. For more information, please see our [Native American Cultures and Clothing: Native American Is Not a Costume](#) guide. Instead, we encourage you to celebrate the vibrancy of Native cultures with some of these resources while you celebrate Thanksgiving and throughout the year.