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Thanksgiving menu – 1621

By Jim Cornelius, Editor

Venison, waterfowl, seafood and beer. The actual menu for the “First Thanksgiving” in Plymouth Plantation in 1621 was a little different from — and richer than — our “traditional” menu. It makes feasting like a Pilgrim sound like a pretty good deal.

The great feast made by the Pilgrims and their Wampanoag friends in 1621 was really more of a harvest celebration than a formal “thanksgiving,” which would have been a wholly religious and more solemn observance. However, that does not mean that giving thanks was not central to the affair. Both cultures — equally observant in their own manner — would have certainly given thanks to their Creator for his bounty.

And the feast *was* bountiful. The Pilgrims who had landed in Plymouth a year earlier had had a very rough go — a terrible winter, beset by disease that killed half of the Mayflower’s roster. The Wampanoag tribes had been ravaged by an earlier epidemic, probably of plague (*see related column, page 16*). The survivors had reason to celebrate a fine harvest — of crops the English had learned to plant from the natives and of nature’s bounty from the surrounding forests and the coastal waters of New England.

That first Thanksgiving, which probably took place in September or October, was a three-day affair, held outdoors at the Plymouth settlement. In addition to feasting, there were shooting contests and physical games where the Pilgrims mingled happily with the visiting Wampanoag.

What was on the menu? Sorry, no pumpkin pie or cranberry sauce. Some informed speculation based on scanty reports by leaders of the Plymouth Plantation gives us a pretty good idea as to what was laid on the log puncheon tables in the fall of 1621.

Edward Winslow reported back to England: “And God be praised we had a good increase... 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. They four in one day killed as much fowl as, with a little help beside, served the company almost a week. At which time, amongst other recreations, we exercised our arms, many of the Indians coming amongst us, and among the rest their greatest king Massasoit, with some ninety men, whom for three days we entertained and feasted, and they went out and killed five deer, which they brought to the plantation and

bestowed on our governor, and upon the captain and others. 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.”

National Geographic, which this year produced a two-part drama based upon the story of the Plymouth colony, notes that the four men sent fowling probably returned with goose and duck, both of which would have been plentiful in the region in the fall.

Based on Winslow’s report, we know for sure that venison was a centerpiece of the feast. Roasting was the likely preparation.

Plymouth was a coastal settlement, so the bounty of the sea was also at hand to add a little surf-and-turf flavor to the festivities. Nathaniel Philbrick, author of “Mayflower: A Story of Courage, Community and War,” believes that striped bass, bluefish and cod would have been on the table. Other seafood like lobster and mussels were common, so it’s a fair bet that they’d have been part of the feast.

National Geographic cites the likely presence of cornbread: “The colonists had just harvested their initial corn crop, so it would have been appropriate to include it on the menu. But it wasn’t the sweet yellow corn that we serve today as a side dish. Instead, they raised Indian corn, which was dried and pounded into meal for baking.”

Squash was also harvested in the 1621 crop and might have been boiled or roasted and served in the feast. Stews were common fare of the day, so a variety of meats and vegetables probably ended up together in the pot.

What about turkey?

The noble bird may have given up pride of place to venison, but it’s pretty certain that our modern tradition has a legitimate founding in the early history. Plymouth governor William Bradford wrote that “... besides waterfowl there was great store of wild turkeys, of which they took many...”

Oh, and beer!

The Pilgrims were not abstemious — they loved their beer. They’d brought some on the Mayflower, and Philbrick notes that they raised barley in the 1621 crop, so they could lay down some home brew.

So, the first Thanksgiving meal was a little more varied than the feast we consider traditional, but it’s really pretty close. All you have to do to celebrate like a Pilgrim is add some venison and seafood, substitute shooting for football — and pour a nice, tall tankard of beer.



“Waiting” by J.L.G. Ferris. The first Thanksgiving menu wasn’t exactly like the modern one.

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