The First Thanksgiving Was Nothing Like What You Were Taught

thefederalist.com/2017/11/22/first-thanksgiving-nothing-like-taught/

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Whether we realize it or not, we all have an image of the first Thanksgiving that's more or less a cartoon we were taught in grade school. In the autumn of 1621, a plucky group of black-clad, buckle-shoed Pilgrims and stoic yet friendly Indians feasted together after a successful autumn harvest, heralding a promising new friendship between their two peoples.

The actual history of the first Thanksgiving is of course nothing like the grade-school story—it's far more interesting and complex. While it undermines the bowdlerized, multicultural narrative of peaceful Indians and well-meaning Puritans living together in harmony, it also informs a radically more nuanced understanding of the world the Pilgrims found when they landed at Plymouth in December 1620.

Among the most compelling historical accounts of that world comes from Charles Mann's intriguing 2005 book, "1491," a revisionist history of the pre-Columbian Americas that renders our storybook conception of the first Thanksgiving obsolete and, by comparison, rather boring. The truth is, the Pilgrims were able to survive and establish their colony because they were drawn into the political machinations of Massasoit, a shrewd and calculating Indian leader who was trying to figure out how to save his people from apocalypse.

The Indians Drew The Pilgrims Into a Political Alliance

Massasoit was the sachem, or political and military leader, of the Wampanoag confederation, a loose combination of villages in southeastern Massachusetts. About five years before the Pilgrims arrived, Massasoit's people had been decimated by diseases brought by earlier European traders. Entire villages had been depopulated—including a Patuxet village that the newly arrived Pilgrims settled into and named New Plymouth.

As Mann explains, Massasoit was in a bind. The epidemic that had hit the Wampanoag hadn't touched their longtime enemies to the west, the Narragansett. Massasoit feared his weakened people would be overrun, so he decided to gamble and let the Pilgrims stay. European traders had been visiting New England for at least a century, but Indian leaders always forbid them from establishing permanent settlements. The relationship was strictly transactional. Far from seeing the Europeans as superior, writes Mann, the Indians had good reason to take advantage of these strange newcomers:

> *Shorter than the natives, oddly dressed, and often unbearably dirty, the pallid foreigners had peculiar blue eyes that peeped out of the masks of bristly, animal-like hair that encased their faces. They were irritatingly garrulous, prone to fits of chicanery, and often surprisingly incompetent at what seemed to Indians like basic tasks. But they also made useful and beautiful goods—copper kettles, glittering colored glass, and steel knives and hatchets—unlike anything else in New England. Moreover they would exchange these valuable items for cheap furs of a sort used by Indians as blankets. It was like happening upon a dingy kiosk that would swap fancy electronic goods for customers' used socks—almost anyone would be willing to overlook the shopkeeper's peculiarities.*

Massasoit's plan was to allow the Pilgrims to stay—as long as they allied with the Wampanoag against the Narragansett. His first meeting with them, however, almost ended in a pitched battle. Massasoit sent two interpreters into the Pilgrim settlement on November 22, 1621. The first, a man named Samoset, was a trusted ally of Massasoit. The second, Tisquantum—better known to us as "Squanto"—was not.

Squanto is of course the friendly Indian from our grade-school textbooks who teaches the Pilgrims how to plant corn and fertilize their crops with fish. The truth about Tisquantum, a member of the Patuxet tribe of the Wampanoag confederation, is that he encountered the Pilgrims after a long and harrowing journey of his own. Seven years before that first Thanksgiving, Tisquantum was captured by British sailors and sold into slavery in Spain, where he was eventually freed by local Roman Catholic priests. He made his way to London, where he learned English and, writes Mann, "served as a kind of living conversation piece at a rich man's house."

Tisquantum eventually arranged for passage back to North America, but when he finally arrived back in Massachusetts, about a year and a half before Massasoit's meeting with the Pilgrims, he found his entire tribe had been wiped out by disease. Mann describes Tisquantum's former home along the New England coast as a "cemetery two hundred miles long and forty miles deep. Patuxet had been hit with special force. Not a single person remained. Tisquantum's entire social world had vanished."

With nowhere left to go, Tisquantum presented himself to Massasoit, but the Indian leader didn't trust him. He had kept Tisquantum "in a kind of captivity since his arrival, monitoring his actions closely," and wouldn't let him negotiate with the Europeans on his own, writes Mann.

The First Meeting at Plymouth Almost Ended In Bloodshed

On this November day at Plymouth, Massasoit sent Samoset and Tisquantum ahead while he and the rest of his Indian party kept out of sight. What followed was a tense encounter that could have abruptly ended the Pilgrims'

foray in the New World:

> *Samoset and Tisquantum spoke with the colonists for about an hour. Perhaps they then gave a signal. Or perhaps Massasoit was simply following a prearranged schedule. In any case, he and the rest of the Indian party appeared without warning at the crest of a hill on the south bank of the creek that ran through the foreigners' camp. Alarmed by Massasoit's sudden entrance, the Europeans withdrew to the hill on the opposite bank, where they had emplaced their few cannons behind a half-finished stockade. A standoff ensued.*

It ended when Edward Winslow, who would later serve as governor of Plymouth Colony and co-author an account of the first Thanksgiving, waded into the creek wearing a full suit of armor and carrying a sword. Through Tisquantum, he offered himself as a hostage. Massasoit accepted and, along with Tisquantum and 20 of his men, crossed over the creek and into the Pilgrim settlement.

Thus the historic meeting and later, after a negotiations and an alliance agreement, the great Thanksgiving feast. Yet the machinations continued. Mann writes about how Tisquantum had plans for reestablishing the remaining Patuxet and convincing the other Wampanoag that he would make a better leader than Massasoit. To do this, writes Mann, he tried to play the Pilgrims and Massasoit against one another, and in the spring of 1622 hatched his plot: "he told the colonists that Massasoit was going to double-cross them by leading a joint attack on Plymouth with the Narragansett. And he attempted to trick the Pilgrims into attacking the sachem."

It didn't work, largely because in the event, cooler heads prevailed. But when Massasoit learned of Tisquantum's failed plot, he demanded the Pilgrims hand him over for execution, which the Pilgrims refused to do. Massasoit, enraged, cut off all contact with Plymouth, including trade, a move that hit Plymouth especially hard amid a drought that summer that withered their crops. Tisquantum would never again leave Plymouth without an escort, and died shortly thereafter on return from a diplomatic trip to southeast Cape Cod.

As for Massasoit and the Wampanoag, their peace with the Pilgrims lasted more than 50 years, until 1675, when one of Massasoit's sons launched an attack and triggered a conflict that would encompass all of New England. The Europeans won, in large part, according to Mann, because by then they outnumbered the natives: "Groups like the Narragansett, which had been spared by the epidemic of 1616, were crushed by a smallpox epidemic in 1633. A third to half of the remaining Indians in New England died… Their societies were destroyed by weapons their opponents could not control and did not even know they had."