

Thanksgiving 2021

A Family Digging Podcast

Carolyn: Welcome to the Family Digging Podcast! I am Carolyn Lancaster, here with Paul Hendee for a session on one of my favorite holidays, Thanksgiving. What's going on, Paul?

Paul: Hi Everyone. This Thanksgiving is the 400th anniversary of the first Thanksgiving at Plymouth Colony in 1621! Actually, It was not the first day set aside for giving thanks in our country: Jamestown, Virginia, claims it, as does St Augustine, Florida, as do Canyon, Texas and Popham, Maine. But it is in Plymouth Colony, originally part of the Colony of Virginia, now southeastern Massachusetts, that the festivities really became famous. Perhaps this is because the feasting lasted three days, not just several hours. It was a PARTY, after a long period of very tough times for both the Pilgrims and the Native Americans.

Carolyn: After the Pilgrims arrived in Fall of 1620, there was a very cold winter in store. They had not yet had an opportunity to build shelters, nor plant and harvest crops for food. They stayed on the Mayflower over the winter, but that had a devastating result - disease spread like wildfire throughout the ship, and by the following spring the original group of 102 had just over fifty people remaining. My ancestors - James Chilton and his wife - were two of the casualties, leaving their youngest daughter, Mary, orphaned at age 13. Only four adult women were left in the entire colony when Spring arrived.

Paul: Likely, the Wampanoag Indians had experienced very large losses in their tribes between 1615 and 1619 due to epidemic disease. An Indian named Tisquantum (called Squanto by the colonists), who lived with the Wampanoags because his entire tribe had been decimated, was called on to be an interpreter between their sachem, Massasoit, and the colonists. He enabled an agreement to be effected between them so that the newcomers could begin to settle Plimoth Plantation, as they named it. And peace was kept without major breaches for over fifty years.

Carolyn: That spring Tisquantum began a twenty-month stint living with the colonists, teaching them how to grow corn, squash and beans, as well as how to hunt and fish. The results were very good which, to say the least, was a relief for the colonists. They chose a day in autumn to celebrate and thank God for His provision that would keep them well fed throughout the winter. When the Wampanoags came in response to hearing the celebratory gunfire that accompanied the event, they were invited to join in the fun. Ninety of them stayed, and they killed five deer. Between the offerings provided by both groups, there was more than plenty for all.

Paul: So what was on the menu besides venison? Let's start with shellfish - oysters, clams, mussels, lobster - as well as flat fish, all grew in abundance there. And there was the corn, squash and beans that the Pilgrims had harvested. Then there was fowl available - ducks, geese, turkey - and partridges.

Carolyn: Some items were missing, for sure! No apple cider; apples had not yet been introduced to New England. No milk, butter or cheese, as cows had not been aboard the Mayflower. No bread, as the stores of flour from the ship had long since been exhausted. It would be years before wheat could be cultivated in New England. And no potatoes because at that time potatoes were thought to be poisonous. But cranberries were abundant in the area, and perhaps some wild honey to sweeten them?

Paul: Thanksgiving days of prayer and feasting grew at an erratic pace and were fairly local in nature - regional at best - until 1777, when George Washington declared the first day of thanksgiving for all thirteen colonies. The emphasis in the Colonial era was acknowledging Holy God in gratitude for his many blessings. Keep in mind, this tradition is older than the nation itself. Indeed, Native Americans were practicing it long before any of our ancestors arrived here. And then there is the eating, of course.

Carolyn: A lot has changed in the past four hundred years. Certainly the emphasis of Thanksgiving has moved well away from its beginnings in Plymouth, and we are none the better for it in my opinion. Also, Native Americans in recent years have come to view the day as one of mourning, which is unfortunate, but understandable. Still, we gather, whether with family or friends, or to engage in a common endeavor such as delivering holiday meals for a local food bank or watching a football game. Especially after the time we have had over the past almost two years, we hope that this year's holiday is a memorable and enjoyable one for all of you.

Paul: If it is a family affair, it may afford you a good opportunity to ask some questions that need to be asked to fill in the blanks in your family history. Thanksgiving can also be an excellent time to share stories, recipes, games and even corny jokes. There are a wide variety of traditions that each of us has to mark the day as special. Giving thanks is a great way to start. (And if you don't thank the cooks, shame on you!) Have fun! Carolyn and I hope to be with you again in early December to start a series we are planning on how to get an education for genealogy. Until then, stay safe and

Both: Happy Digging!

