

# AN INTRODUCTION TO AMERICAN INDIAN HISTORY

## RETHINKING THANKSGIVING: THE REALITY OF INDIAN-ENGLISH RELATIONS IN COLONIAL NEW ENGLAND

### TEACHER BACKGROUND

One paragraph in a letter by Edward Winslow inspired the holiday of Thanksgiving. Winslow recounted the events immediately following the Plymouth colony's harvest in the fall of 1621. There is no reason to doubt the accuracy of his description of a harvest celebration, in which the Pilgrims were joined by Wampanoag Indians. However, the mythology that has grown around this event is inaccurate and confusing to students. Students learn about friendship and cooperation between Indians and Pilgrims, but in the next chapter of their textbook this relationship is one of violence and mistrust. A clearer understanding of the political situation before and after the harvest of 1621 can help them to understand the full narrative of events.

The full story of Thanksgiving can also give students in Utah perspective. How does Utah's story of settlers seeking religious freedom also turn to violence within one generation?

### OBJECTIVE

The student will be able to comprehend the differences between the story of Thanksgiving and the reality of the political tensions in early seventeenth-century New England and compare that situation to the settlement of Utah.

### TEACHER MATERIALS

*At a Glance: Indian Relations in Early New England*

*We Shall Remain: The Paiute* (chapter 2, 4:15–5:15)

*We Shall Remain: The Ute* (chapter 2, 3:25–8:19)

*We Shall Remain: The Navajo* (chapter 2, 3:25–5:27)

*We Shall Remain: The Goshute* (chapter 2, 8:55–17:00)

*We Shall Remain: The Shoshone* (chapter 2, 3:23–14:35)

### STUDENT MATERIALS

Edward Winslow Describes the  
First Thanksgiving  
State of Affairs at the First Thanksgiving

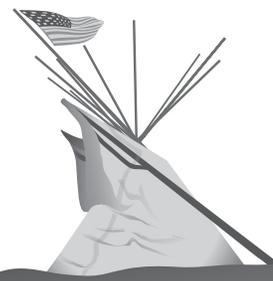
### TIME FRAME - VERSATILE

Two thirty-minute periods  
One class period with homework

### PROCEDURE

Allow students to brainstorm on the question "What do Thanksgiving and Pioneer Day have in common?"

Make a classroom list of results. (These may be recorded individually on a KWL sheet.)



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## PROCEDURE (CONT.)

Provide each student with a copy of the Winslow letter. Explain that this is one of the only documents from that time to support our stories of the first Thanksgiving. Discuss as a class how much of the “mythology of Thanksgiving” was created long after that time.

Provide students with the State of Affairs page and a sheet of 11x17 copy paper.

Have students create a Venn diagram comparing and contrasting the myth of Thanksgiving with what we have come to understand about that time. This may be class work or homework.

Screen the *We Shall Remain* clips describing the American Indian perspective of Mormon settlement. Allow the students to take notes. On the other side of their Venn diagram, have students compare and contrast the story of Mormon settlement they are most familiar with to the story told in the films. They may want to use their Utah history textbooks as a resource. (This may be class work or homework.)

## VARIATIONS/EXTENSIONS

Instead of having the students read the “State of Affairs at Thanksgiving,” show them clips from the American Experience films *We Shall Remain: After the Mayflower* (chapters 1, 2, and 3) and *We Shall Remain: Geronimo* (chapter 1).

Have students investigate and compare the long-term effects of contact on the Wampanoag and Utah’s American Indian tribes.

Review the effects of the other European visitors to Utah using elements from the “Rethinking First Contact” lesson plan available at [www.UtahIndians.org](http://www.UtahIndians.org).

## ADDITIONAL REFERENCES

Diamond, Jared. *Guns, Germs, and Steele: The Fates of Human Societies*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1999.

Grace, Catherine O’Neill, and Margaret M. Bruchac, with Plimouth Plantation. *1621: A New Look at Thanksgiving*. Washington, D.C.: National Geographic, 2004.

Mann, Charles C. *1491: New Revelations of the Americas before Columbus*. New York: Vintage Books, 2005.

Taylor, Alan. *American Colonies: The Settling of North America*. New York: Penguin Books

## STANDARDS ADDRESSED

State Standards

Seventh Grade Social Studies – Utah Studies: 3/3/b; 5/1/c

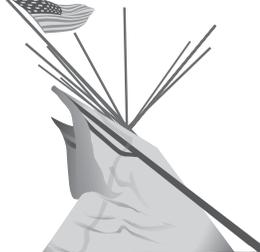
Eighth Grade Social Studies – United States History I: 3/1/a&b; 3/3/d; 4/2/c

Accreditation Competencies

Thinking and Reasoning/Acquires, organizes, and evaluates information to make informed decisions/Compares and contrasts specific abstract of concrete attributes

NCSS Standards

Middle Grades: 1/a,b&d; 2/a,c&e; 3/h&j; 5/b&g; 6/d&h;7/a&f



# AN INTRODUCTION TO AMERICAN INDIAN HISTORY

## **AT A GLANCE:** INDIAN RELATIONS IN EARLY NEW ENGLAND

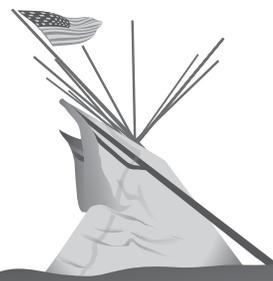
Between 1616 and 1618, a disease brought by European explorers swept through American Indian populations living along the coast of what is now Massachusetts. This epidemic, possibly the plague, decimated some tribes, in many cases wiping out whole villages. The Pilgrims, who landed on the south shore of Massachusetts Bay in 1620, were the unknowing beneficiaries of this epidemic. They landed at a recently abandoned Indian village, and because the former inhabitants had already cleared fields in the area, it was an ideal place for the Plymouth colonists to build their settlement.

The epidemic also set the stage for the alliance the Pilgrims forged with the Wampanoag Indians. Europeans had been exploring the coast for decades, and local Indians were happy to trade with the visitors but tried to discourage settlements. Massasoit, the leader of the Wampanoags, allowed the Pilgrims to settle the area because he believed it was in the best political interest of his people. The decade prior to the arrival of the Pilgrims had been devastating for the Wampanoags. Indian groups attacked them from the north and west, and they lost large numbers to disease. Moreover, the nearby Narragansett Indians had not traded heavily with Europeans and, therefore, had not lost as many to the epidemic. The Narragansetts began to demand tribute from the Wampanoags, and Massasoit decided to ally himself with the English to maintain the balance of power between his people and the Narragansetts.

With the help of two translators, Samoset and Tisquantum, Massasoit forged an alliance with the English governor. This alliance also served the interests of the Plymouth colonists, who had lost half their

population in the long, harsh winter of 1620–21. Tisquantum—sometimes referred to as “Squanto,” though this is less accurate version of his name—was an especially able translator. A Patuxet Indian whose village was wiped out in the epidemic, he had been enslaved by Europeans and had toured England before returning to America and joining the Wampanoags. Tisquantum showed the Plymouth colonists how to grow corn and catch eels, and with his aid the colony had a successful harvest. Interestingly, Tisquantum is remembered for teaching the colonists to fertilize their crops with fish, but it is likely that this was not an American Indian farming practice. Certain areas in Europe had used fish as fertilizer since the Middle Ages, and Tisquantum probably learned it during his enslavement.

In the late summer of 1621, the Pilgrims held a celebration to commemorate their successful harvest. This is the event that we now refer to as the first Thanksgiving, and much of what we know about it comes from the writings of Edward Winslow. The problem with the way we remember Thanksgiving today is that we think its main purpose was to celebrate peaceful Indian-European relations. Winslow’s retelling gives us a different picture. After the Pilgrims “exercised our arms,” Massasoit arrived with ninety men and no women and children. The absence of women and children is a clear indication that this was not a planned party. The fact that there had been a large amount of shooting just prior to the arrival of Massasoit and his men suggests that they may have been checking to see if there was a problem. Only after the confusion was cleared up did Massasoit send hunters to bring deer to support the feast and send for the women and



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children. It is likely that the party continued for three days. Interestingly, most of the food at the celebration was probably Indian food provided by the Wampanoags.

Ultimately, this isolated celebration could not mask the growing conflicts between the Wampanoags and the English. Cultural differences created a gulf between the groups. Indians, for example, could not understand why Europeans did not bathe regularly or why they blew their noses into handkerchiefs that they then kept. In addition to these small misunderstandings, Tisquantum may have deliberately discredited Massasoit in the eyes of the colonists in an attempt to usurp Massasoit's power and social standing for himself.

Most importantly, the growing number of English settlers tipped the balance of power against the Wampanoags. By the late 1640s the English were no longer content with allowing the Indians to remain independent. They erected a series of "praying towns" meant to keep the Indians under close surveillance and to force the Indians to convert to Christianity and adopt sedentary lifestyles. As an added benefit to the English, the "praying towns" restricted Indians to a fixed area, freeing up more Indian lands for colonial settlement. For their part, the Wampanoags had little interest in adopting European ways. They considered their relationship with the English a political partnership, and praying towns seemed like a threat to their authority.

It was in this context that Metacom, Massasoit's son, came to power. Known to the English as King Philip, Metacom considered war with the English inevitable if the Wampanoags were to preserve their way of life. Allied with several other local sachems, he mounted a rebellion against the English from 1675 to 1676 in which at least a thousand English colonists and almost three thousand Indians (a quarter of the Indian population of southern New England) died. The English victory in this

bloody war marked the end of Indian power in New England. Those who did not die or flee were confined to reservations and relegated to the lowest ranks of colonial society.

Though separated by time and space, the story of contact between Utah's Indians and members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints parallels the New England story in many ways. Many Utah tribes saw LDS settlers, at least initially, as potentially valuable allies and trading partners. The Utes and Shoshones sought to acquire firearms from Mormons to use against their enemies, including each other. The Southern Paiutes invited the Mormons to settle because they saw the settlers as a potential buffer against Ute slave raids and hoped to gain access to Euro-American material goods. The Goshutes, too, were friendly to LDS settlers, even as first Utes and then Mormons began to overrun traditional Goshute lands.

Another important parallel stems from the fact that both the settlement of New England and the settlement of Utah were driven by religious impulses. Like the Puritans, members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints were interested in Indians as potential converts, though they experienced varying degrees of success in their attempts to convert Utah's Indians.

Finally, like the Wampanoags, Utah's indigenous people could not have predicted the sheer numbers of Mormon settlers that would pour into the Great Basin during the last half of the nineteenth century. Tribes that initially welcomed the Mormons soon found themselves fighting over resources and lands. (For a more extensive look at the history of contact in Utah, see the lesson plans "Rethinking First Contact" and "Rethinking Manifest Destiny.")

More about Thanksgiving!

## STATE OF AFFAIRS AT THE FIRST THANKSGIVING

When the Pilgrims landed in North America in 1620, they were not the first Europeans that the Wampanoag Indians had seen. Europeans had been sailing up and down the coast for years, trading with the American Indians. Sometimes the Indians would come on board the boats to trade. Sometimes the Europeans would kidnap them and take them back to Europe as slaves or “souvenirs.”

The Wampanoags were happy to trade with the Europeans, but did not want them to stay on shore too long. The Indians noticed that following visits from these strangers, large numbers of people would get sick and die. That, along with the kidnappings, did not make the Europeans welcome in North America. So, why did Massasoit, leader of the Wampanoags, allow the Pilgrims to settle in Patuxet? He needed an ally against another Indian tribe, the Narragansetts. The Wampanoag had lost many more people to the diseases carried by European sailors than their enemies the Narragansetts.

The Pilgrims did not seem threatening. There were only a hundred people, including women and children. They didn't look that healthy, and winter was coming. This made them a small enough threat to ignore. Also, they had guns, and that made them worth befriending.

Because some of the kidnapped Indians had made their way back to America, Massasoit had two

translators to help him make an alliance with the Pilgrims. Although the alliance was weak, it lasted long enough for the two groups to feast together in 1621. The Indians brought most of the food, and the harvest celebration lasted for three days. Sadly, the friendship between the Indians and the settlers didn't last long after that first “Thanksgiving.”

Tisquantum was the translator Massasoit left with the Pilgrims. He is sometimes called “Squanto” in stories of the first Thanksgiving. He did not grow up with the Wampanoag Indians, and he may have said things that made the Pilgrims mistrust Massasoit and the Wampanoags. Also, the English took more and more land that had belonged to the Indians. More settlers arrived from England, and they started to outnumber the Indians. They tried to convert the Wampanoags to Christianity and make the Indians give up their traditions.

Tensions were high by the time Massasoit's son Metacom became the leader of the Wampanoags. The English settlers called Metacom King Phillip, and the war that eventually erupted between the Pilgrims and the Wampanoags would be called King Phillip's War. The English killed Metacom and displayed his severed head on a pole. The English and Wampanoags were no longer friends like they had been at the first Thanksgiving.



## EDWARD WINSLOW DESCRIBES THE FIRST THANKSGIVING

“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 fruits 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 recreation, 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.”

Quoted in Catherine O'Neill Grace and Margaret M. Bruchac with Plimoth Plantation, *1621: A New Look at Thanksgiving* (Washington, D.C.: National Geographic Society, 2004), 29–30.