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THANKSGIVING: Myth and Reality

The mythical national origins of the U.S.A. go back to the arrival in 1620 of “the Pilgrim Fathers”[[1]](#footnote-2) at Plymouth Rock[[2]](#footnote-3) in what is today Massachusetts and their “First Thanksgiving” in the autumn of 1621[[3]](#footnote-4). More than any other U.S. holiday, Thanksgiving celebrates Anglo-Saxon/European ethnocentrism.[[4]](#footnote-5)

According to the myth perpetuated over the years in the popular imagination:

- Christopher Columbus “discovered” America in 1492[[5]](#footnote-6) (celebrated every year in the U.S.A. on “Columbus Day”, 12 October, but marked as a "Day of Resistance” by many Native Americans).

- North America was a “virgin continent,” uninhabited except for small numbers of “primitive” “Indians.”[[6]](#footnote-7)

- In 1620 the Pilgrim Fathers fled from England looking for religious freedom.[[7]](#footnote-8)

- The Pilgrim’s ship, “the Mayflower”, landed at Plymouth Rock[[8]](#footnote-9) in November 1620 after being blown off course during a storm or due to a navigational error.[[9]](#footnote-10)

- After a hard winter of hunger, disease and death, the Pilgrims were befriended by some Native Americans who helped them to plant indigenous crops and to hunt and fish the local wildlife.

- After a successful harvest which promised well for the coming winter, in the autumn of 1621 the Pilgrims decided to organize a great feast to thank God for his providence, and they invited some of the local Native Americans to participate. This was to become the “First Thanksgiving” commemorated today by the national holiday.

- Through hard work and sacrifice, the Pilgrims created a new, prosperous society out of the American wilderness[[10]](#footnote-11) based on democracy and religious freedom and tolerance.[[11]](#footnote-12)

- Plymouth Colony was the first permanent European settlement in what is today the U.S.A.[[12]](#footnote-13)

1. The term “Pilgrims” was first used in the 1870s. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Speaking as an African-American, Malcolm X declared: “We did not land on Plymouth Rock. Plymouth Rock landed on us.” [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. The Pilgrims were not included in the Thanksgiving tradition until the 1890s. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Its modern celebration dates back to President Abraham Lincoln’s proclamation of Thanksgiving as a national holiday in 1863 during the Civil War (1861-65). Since 1970 it has been marked as a “National Day of Mourning” for Native Americans. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Today it is well-known that Columbus was not even the first non-Native American to arrive in the Americas. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Most historians today estimate that there were between 10 and 20 million Native Americans living in what is today the U.S.A. and Canada before the arrival of Europeans. The Native American population in the U.S.A. today is an estimated 1.4 million. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. This is inaccurate: the Pilgrims had already found complete religious freedom in Holland. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. The Pilgrims actually landed first on Cape Cod, on 21 November 1620, where they proceeded to rob Native American homes and graves. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Historians today believe that the Pilgrims intentionally went to what is modern-day Massachusetts. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. The Pilgrims chose to settle at Plymouth because it was the site of an abandoned Native American village surrounded by cleared fields which until recently had been planted with corn. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. The Pilgrims together with the other Puritans who arrived in subsequent years created an intolerant theocratic society based on the oppression and genocide of the original Native American inhabitants. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. Plymouth Colony was neither the first permanent English nor European settlement in the U.S.A. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)