

AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

The Pilgrims: Alliance with Massasoit's People and the First Thanksgiving TRANSCRIPT

Title Card: About 50 of the *Mayflower's* 102 passengers died from disease or exposure during their first winter

NARRATOR: The days were growing longer – and the death rate had finally begun to subside – when on Friday March 16th, cries of panic and alarm rang out – as a lone warrior – naked except for a loin cloth, and carrying a bow – broke cover from the line of trees near their huts and walked boldly into the camp.

Edward Winslow: [actor's voice] He saluted us in English, and bade us welcome, He was the first savage we had met withal. He said his name was Samoset. He told us the place we now live is called Patuxet – and that about four years ago all the inhabitants died of an extraordinary plague, so as there is none to hinder our possession, or to lay claim unto it.

Kathleen Donegan, Literary Critic: The Wampanoags are looking for an ally. They're suspicious of the Pilgrims when they first come – they stay away from them at first come – they watch them. But, eventually, they realize that an alliance is going to be best for them as well.

Tobias Vanderhoop, Chairman, Wampanoag Tribe of Aquinnah: It was not just political convenience – it was survival. If you do not have power backing you, and you are a weakened people, then the enemies that naturally exist around you will take advantage. And our leadership knew very well the tough decisions that needed to be made at the time in order to ensure that Wampanoag people continued to exist in Wampanoag territory.

NARRATOR: Six days later, the emissary returned – bringing the principle leader of the Wampanoags, their Massasoit, and sixty of his men – including Tisquantum, survivor of Patuxet – who served as interpreter as the two sides concluded a remarkable treaty – agreeing among other things not to harm each other's people – and to come to each the other's aid in the event of attack.

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NARRATOR: It was also agreed that Tisquantum would remain with the struggling group – on the site of his former home – to help with the spring planting.

Nathaniel Philbrick, Writer: Both peoples were in a survival situation. The Wampanoag had been devastated by disease in the three years before – and the neighboring Narragansetts were threatening to really take them over. The Pilgrims were obviously very close to losing everything after that first winter and so they began to form an alliance with Massasoit and the Wampanoags.

NARRATOR: By October, They had managed to bring in a successful harvest of corn – thanks to Tisquantum – and as the leaves began to turn, they prepared, Edward Winslow reported, to in a “special manner rejoice together after we had gathered the fruit of our labors.”

No one at the time called it Thanksgiving. William Bradford made no mention of it in his history.

Linda Coombs, Wampanoag Historian: There isn't much of a record. There's a paragraph, I think, in Winslow, that describes what's come to be known as the first Thanksgiving. It says nothing about an invitation. It was just that the English were doing this thing, and Massasoit showed up with these ninety men. They stayed for three days – they went out and got five deer to add to what the English were cooking. They played games together. There's like four little facts of what happened – and then the rest of it is fluff, that's been added over the centuries.

Kathleen Donegan, Literary Critic: We love the story of Thanksgiving because it's about alliance and abundance and envisioning a future where Native Americans and colonial Americans can come together and celebrate the providences of a single God. But part of the reason that they were grateful was that they had been in such misery; that they had lost so many people – on both sides. So, in some way, that day of thanksgiving is also coming out of mourning; it's also coming out of grief. And this abundance that is a relief from that loss. But we don't think about the loss – we think about the abundance.