

# Thanksgiving lesson plan



# OBJECTIVES

1. To understand that Thanksgiving is set in history as a religious celebration.
2. To understand that it was a pivotal historic event in a nation's history.
3. To understand where the foods come from, and why.
4. To understand how religious events often get tied into secular holidays.
5. That representations of historic events by artists can sometimes be inaccurate because they were made many years after the event.
6. To compare and contrast the qualities and usefulness of photographic images, artists' illustrations, and written descriptions.

# SETTING THE SCENE

Prayers of thanks and special thanksgiving ceremonies are common among almost all religions after harvests and at other times. The Thanksgiving holiday's history in North America is rooted in English traditions dating from the Protestant Reformation. It also has aspects of a harvest festival, even though the harvest in New England occurs well before the late-November date on which the modern Thanksgiving holiday is celebrated. In the English tradition, days of thanksgiving, and special thanksgiving religious services became important during the English Reformation in the reign of Henry VIII, and in reaction to the large number of religious holidays on the Catholic calendar. Before 1536 there were 95 Church holidays, plus 52 Sundays, when people were required to attend church and forego work, and sometimes pay for expensive celebrations. The 1536 reforms reduced the number of Church holidays to 27, but some Puritans wished to eliminate all Church holidays, and replace them with specially called Days of Fasting, or Days of Thanksgiving, in response to events that the Puritans viewed as acts of special providence. Unexpected disasters or threats of judgement from on high called for Days of Fasting. Special blessings, viewed as coming from God, called for Days of Thanksgiving. For example, Days of Fasting were called on account of drought in 1611, floods in 1613, and plagues in 1604 and 1622. Days of Thanksgiving were called following the victory over the Spanish Armada in 1588, and following the deliverance of Queen Anne in 1705. An unusual annual Day of Thanksgiving began in 1606 following the failure of the Gunpowder Plot in 1605 and developed into Guy Fawkes Day.

**Note: we have books on Guy Fawkes Day as well as Thanksgiving and Harvest Festival.**

# CLASSWORK

1. Show or print the attached illustration of The First Thanksgiving by Ferris (end of sheet).

Jean Leon Gerome Ferris painted this in 1899, nearly 300 years after the event. He was a romantic painter with relatively little knowledge of the event.

The painting shows common misconceptions about the event. Pilgrims in the United States did not wear such clothes. The clothing shown is completely impractical for the kind of work the first Pilgrims had to do.

The Wampanoag are dressed in the style of Native Americans from the Great Plains. He did not have any pictures of the real Native Americans of New England at the time, and in any case his knowledge of Native American culture was minimal.

Ask students to explain what the picture imagines was happening (the brave Pilgrims were feeding the 'childlike' Indians) whereas in reality it had been the other way around.

Discuss why Ferris made this painting (it represents an historical event of importance, and many people find it easier to imagine a scene from a painting rather than a description).

Then compare that painting with one made in 1914. Which might be more accurate?

Discuss why, as a result, it is important to be as accurate as possible about such things as relationships and clothing.

Here are some first-hand accounts of the event. Use them to compare and contrast with the picture.

Squanto, a Patuxet Native American who lived with the Wampanoag tribe, taught the Pilgrims how to catch eels and grow corn, and served as an interpreter for them. Squanto had learned English during his enslavement in England. The Wampanoag leader Massasoit had given food to the colonists during the first winter when supplies brought from England were insufficient.

The Pilgrims celebrated at Plymouth for three days after their first



harvest in 1621. The exact time is unknown, but it was between Sept. 21 and Nov. 11, 1621, with the most likely time being around Michaelmas (Sept. 29) It included the 50 Pilgrims who remained of the 100 who had landed, and 90 Native Americans who were invited as honored guests. The feast was cooked by the four adult Pilgrim women who survived their first winter in the New World (Eleanor Billington, Elizabeth Hopkins, Mary Brewster, and Susanna (White) Winslow), along with young daughters and male and female servants.

Two colonists gave personal accounts of the 1621 feast in Plymouth, Massachusetts. The Pilgrims, most of whom were Separatists (English Dissenters), were NOT the same as the Puritans who built their Massachusetts Bay Colony in Boston in 1628.

William Bradford, in *Of Plymouth Plantation* (then called *Plimoth Plantation*) wrote:

“They began now to gather in the small harvest they had, and to fit up their houses and dwellings against winter, being all well recovered in health and strength and had all things in good plenty. For as some were thus employed in affairs abroad, others were exercised in fishing, about cod and bass and other fish, of which they took good store, of which every family had their portion. All the summer there was no want; and now began to come in store of fowl, as winter approached, of which this place did abound when they came first (but afterward decreased by degrees). And besides waterfowl there was great store of wild turkeys, of which they took many, besides venison, etc. Besides, they had about a peck a meal a week to a person, or now since harvest, Indian corn to the proportion. Which made many afterwards write so largely of their plenty here to their friends in England, which were not feigned but true reports. “

Edward Winslow wrote:

“Our harvest being gotten in, our governor [Bradford] sent four men on fowling, that so we might after a special manner rejoice together after we had gathered the fruits of our labor. 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 recreations, we exercised our alms [giving], many of the Indians coming amongst us, and among the rest their greatest king Massasoit, with some ninety men, whom for three days we

**These descriptions are also given separately at the end of this plan so they can be reproduced.**

entertained and feasted, and they went out and killed five deer, which we 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.”

The Pilgrims held a true thanksgiving celebration in 1623, probably on Wednesday, July 30, 1623, a day before the arrival of a supply ship with more colonists, but before the fall harvest.

This was important because it was a holiday set out by the governor, not a religious celebration. This made it the first civil recognition of Thanksgiving in New England.

However, these original documents were lost and did not reappear until many years after the Thanksgiving festival was set in the minds of all people, across the nation.

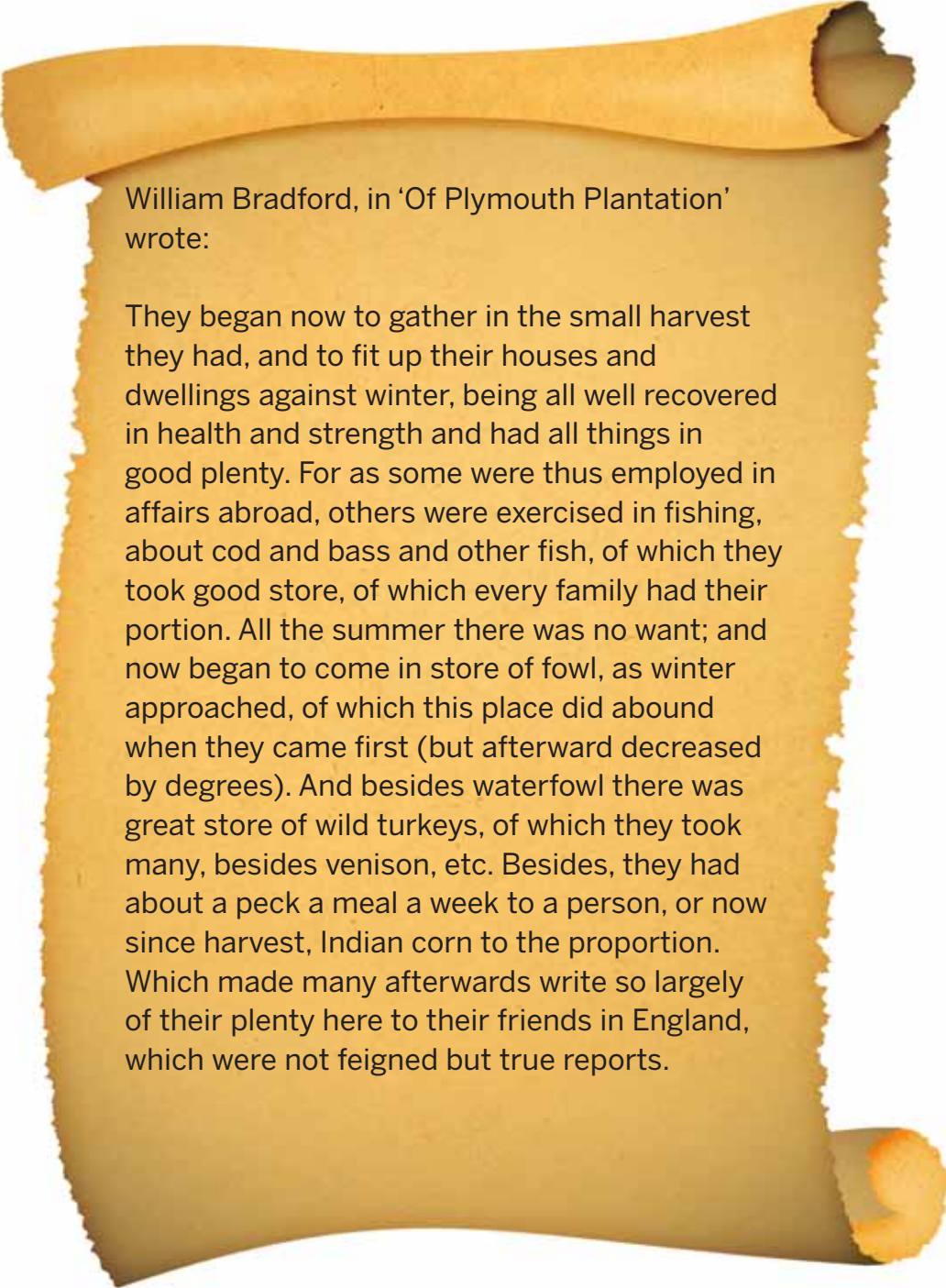
What it did was to find a day where the new nation could rally around something in their history which was of significance.

What changed this obscure thanksgiving into a national event was the Revolutionary War. During the war it was important to have some thanksgiving to raise spirits when the war was going the way of the Patriots. So, for example, George Washington, leader of the revolutionary forces in the American Revolutionary War, proclaimed a Thanksgiving in December 1777 as a victory celebration honoring the defeat of the British at Saratoga.

After this, Thanksgivings were held in some states and not others. It was the American Civil War that changed it into a national holiday. In the middle of the American Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln proclaimed a national Thanksgiving Day, to be celebrated on the final Thursday in November 1863. That is why it is the date it is. It is really nothing to do with the date of the first Thanksgiving, or related to food gathering, but related to survival of a nation in times of peril.

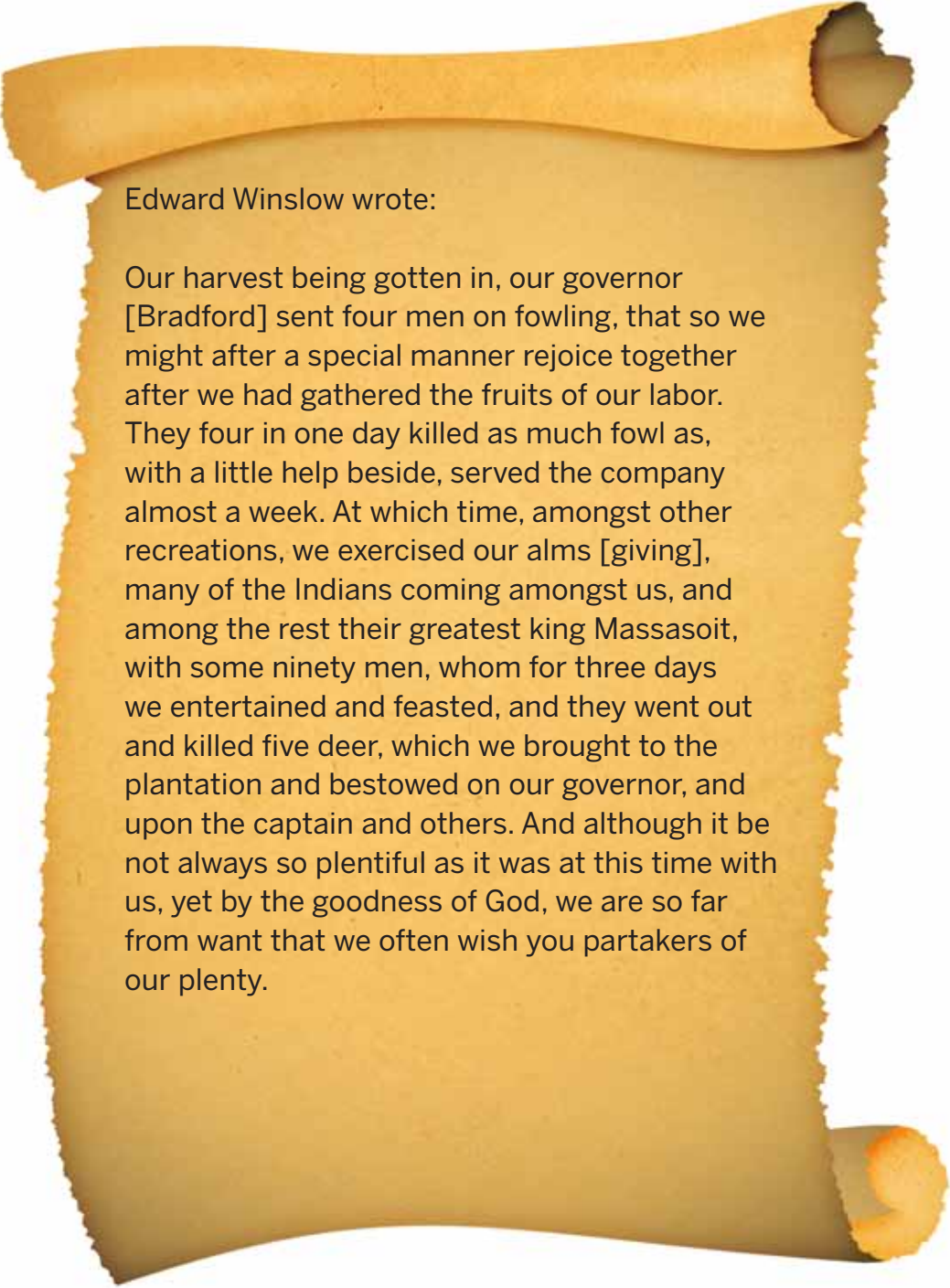
Since then, of course, it has been all mixed up and made into a commercial event.

The material above will give you sufficient documentary evidence to discuss the idea of thanksgiving and its development. You might like to discuss why Thanksgiving is related back to the Plymouth Plantation and not the Civil War (too contentious, and not a day of positive outcome free from divisive connotations).



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Ferris 1899





Brownscombe 1914