

# Myths about the Mayflower

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The Pilgrim Fathers arrive at Plymouth, Massachusetts, in November 1620 after sailing across the Atlantic Ocean on the Mayflower. Painting by W.J. Aylward. Image courtesy of Getty Images.

The Mayflower was an English ship. It brought a group of English men and women to North America. In later years, those voyagers became known as the Pilgrims.

The Pilgrims left England in the fall of 1620. They planned to land near the mouth of the Hudson River. Instead, they ended up on the shore of Cape Cod Bay. In 1621, they established a colony there.

The new colony was named Plymouth. It was the first lasting European settlement in New England.

We have all heard the story of the Pilgrims and their first thanksgiving feast. It is one of the best-known stories in American history.

However, some of the things we have been told about that feast are not really true. They are myths. These made-up tales have been repeated over and over until almost everyone believes them.

Discover the real facts behind some common Thanksgiving myths.

**MYTH: The first Thanksgiving was in 1621 and the Pilgrims celebrated it every year thereafter.**

FACT: The first feast was not repeated the next year. For that reason, it cannot be considered the beginning of a yearly holiday.

In fact, the colonists did not even call the day Thanksgiving. To them, a thanksgiving was a religious holiday. It was a day on which they would go to church. There they would thank God for a good event, such as the winning of a battle.

During the 1621 feast the Pilgrims and Wampanoag Indians danced, sang songs and played games. If it had been a religious holiday, such activities would not have been allowed. The feast was basically a giant party. The Pilgrims would never have thought of it as a thanksgiving.

**MYTH: The original Thanksgiving feast took place on the fourth Thursday of November.**

FACT: The 1621 feast took place sometime between September 21 and November 11. Unlike our modern holiday, it was three days long.

The event was based on English harvest festivals. Such festivals were held to celebrate the harvesting of crops. Usually, they took place around the 29th of September.

In the following years thanksgiving became the custom in New England. It was celebrated every year after the harvest.

By the 1850s, many other states also celebrated thanksgiving. In 1863, President Abraham Lincoln decided to make it a national holiday. He declared that Thanksgiving Day would fall on the last Thursday of each November.

There was a problem with this, though. November sometimes has five Thursdays, and sometimes four. Therefore, the holiday happened at different times of the month from year to year.

In 1939, President Franklin D. Roosevelt decided to fix Thanksgiving's date more firmly. He set the date for Thanksgiving to the fourth Thursday of every November. The change became law in 1941.

**MYTH: The Pilgrims wore only black and white clothing. They had buckles on their hats, garments and shoes.**

FACT: Buckles were not common until later in the 1600s. As for black and white clothes, they were mostly worn only on Sunday. Women typically dressed in red, green, brown, blue, purple and gray. Men wore clothing in white, tan, black, green and brown.

**MYTH: The Mayflower was headed for Virginia, but due to a navigational mistake it ended up in Cape Cod, Massachusetts.**

FACT: The Pilgrims were indeed planning to settle in Virginia. However, what they called Virginia was not the modern state of Virginia. Instead, Virginia was the name used for the entire eastern coastline of the future United States.

The Pilgrims were heading for an area that later became New York State. At the time, it would have been considered “Northern Virginia.” However, rough seas kept them from finishing their voyage.

The Pilgrims decided to settle along the shore of Cape Cod Bay instead. There they built the colony of Plymouth. It was the first town in what later became the state of Massachusetts.

**Quiz**

- 1 Read the section "MYTH: The original Thanksgiving feast took place on the fourth Thursday of November."

Which sentence from the section explains when Thanksgiving happens now?

- (A) The 1621 feast took place sometime between September 21 and November 11.
- (B) Usually, they took place around the 29th of September.
- (C) He declared that Thanksgiving Day would fall on the last Thursday of each November.
- (D) He set the date for Thanksgiving to the fourth Thursday of every November.

- 2 Read the selection from the section "MYTH: The first Thanksgiving was in 1621 and the Pilgrims celebrated it every year thereafter."

*During the 1621 feast the Pilgrims and Wampanoag Indians danced, sang songs and played games. If it had been a religious holiday, such activities would not have been allowed. The feast was basically a giant party. The Pilgrims would never have thought of it as a thanksgiving.*

Based on this selection, which of the following is TRUE?

- (A) The first Thanksgiving was a religious celebration that the Pilgrims started.
- (B) The Pilgrims did not dance, sing and play games during religious holidays.
- (C) The first Thanksgiving was a Wampanoag tradition that the Pilgrims adopted.
- (D) The Pilgrims and Indians taught each other many things about battles and parties.

- 3 Fill in the blank.

Overall, the article is organized around .....

- (A) common myths and accurate information.
- (B) common myths and how they developed.
- (C) common myths and why people believe them.
- (D) common myths and who first started them.

- 4 Read the selection from the section "MYTH: The original Thanksgiving feast took place on the fourth Thursday of November."

*FACT: The 1621 feast took place sometime between September 21 and November 11. Unlike our modern holiday, it was three days long.*

How is the selection MOSTLY organized?

- (A) compare and contrast
- (B) cause and effect
- (C) problem and solution
- (D) sequence