

FESTIVALS & CELEBRATIONS · GRADES 3–5

Thanksgiving

History, meaning, and a more honest look

Quick facts

USA	Fourth Thursday of November — a federal holiday since 1863.
Canada	Second Monday of October — earlier because Canadian harvest is earlier.
What it is	A day of gratitude — celebrating the harvest and giving thanks for what we have.
Tradition	Big family dinner — usually turkey, stuffing, cranberry sauce, pumpkin pie.

The story you might know

Many people learn that Thanksgiving celebrates a 1621 meal between English Pilgrims and the Wampanoag people in what is now Massachusetts. The Pilgrims, who had come from England, had survived their first winter with help from the Wampanoag. They held a harvest celebration together.

What historians say is more accurate

The 1621 meal happened, but it wasn't called 'Thanksgiving' at the time, and it wasn't repeated as an annual tradition. The story we tell now was written down hundreds of years later. For Native American peoples, the years that followed were marked by disease, broken treaties, and devastating loss — not celebration. Many Native American families today observe a 'National Day of Mourning' on Thanksgiving instead.

Two ways to think about Thanksgiving today



What's beautiful about it

It's a day specifically about GRATITUDE — pausing to notice what we have, rather than what we don't. Families travel huge distances to be together. There's something rare and good in that.

What we can do better

Tell the story honestly. Acknowledge that for the people who were already living here, the arrival of European settlers brought enormous loss. Both things can be true. Holidays can hold complicated history.

Discuss

1. What are three things you're grateful for today?
2. Can you celebrate something while also being honest about its difficult history?
3. What other holidays have stories that get simpler as they get re-told?

