

Thankstaking



Where were you last October 9th? What about November 23rd? If you spent these days as I did—the former enjoying the small glories of a three-day weekend, and the latter around a table heaped with turkey and trimmings—you may have missed an important new twist in the chain linking the present to the past. In recent years, Columbus Day and Thanksgiving, two seemingly all-American holidays, have been “outed,” unmasked as racist rites. Turned upside down, mostly by Native American activists, these festivals have re-emerged transformed: Columbus Day has become Indigenous Peoples’ Day; Thanksgiving, the National Day of Mourning. These are days of rage, their organizers tell us, not days of rest, occasions for fasting rather than feasting. But we might wonder, when and why did the nasty business of Colonialism get mixed up with the quaint charms of ye olde colonial holidays?

Thanksgiving, long a painful holiday for Native Americans, first came under sustained public attack in 1970. That’s when officials of the state of Massachusetts vetted the text of an oration that Frank B. James, a Wampanoag leader, was slated to deliver at a banquet celebrating the 350th anniversary of the *Mayflower*’s landing. Deeming James’s impassioned narrative of stolen lands and broken promises off-key for the occasion, they promptly rescinded their invitation to break bread with him, thus inverting the very mythic, ancestral feast they were gathered to commemorate. But James didn’t go away hungry—or silent. He found another outlet for his voice when, that Thanksgiving, he gathered with hundreds of other Native American protesters on Cole’s Hill, the

promontory above Plymouth Rock. There, they countered ritual with anti-ritual as they blanketed the rock with sand, dusted it off, and buried it again, thereby covering Thanksgiving with the first National Day of Mourning.



"The Landing of the Pilgrim Fathers," an 1885 parody of an 1850 painting by Charles Lucy. Courtesy the AAS

Thirty-one years later, this annual commemoration of an "un-Thanksgiving" continues. Now organized by the [United American Indians of New England](#) (UAINE), the National Day of Mourning lays at the alabaster feet of those mythic Pilgrims not a wreath, but a host of present-day evils including "sexism, racism, anti-lesbian and gay bigotry, jails, and the class system." Last fall's protest—which the *Boston Globe* pronounced "peaceful and uneventful" when compared to the alleged police brutality that had marred the event in 1997—was dedicated to the cause of Leonard Peltier, the American Indian Movement leader sentenced to death for the 1976 murder of two FBI agents. Quite a distance from William Bradford and Tisquantum.

The reincarnation of Columbus Day is both more recent and more thorough going. Since the Columbian legacy first fell under scrutiny during preparations for the quincentennial year of 1992, states and municipalities across the country have changed the tone and the terms of their commemorations to force a certain Genoese sailor off center stage. In Berkeley, California, an annual celebration of Native arts and history known as Indigenous Peoples' Day has replaced Columbus Day on the official calendar. South Dakota likewise renamed the federal holiday that falls on the Monday nearest October 12th Native American Day, while New York City and San Francisco celebrate a generic Italian Pride Day. From sea to shining sea, fealty to Columbus has become, quite literally, a love that dare not speak its name. The point was brought home last fall in Denver, where thousands of demonstrators converged to protest the Sons of Italy's decision to put Columbus back into a parade that had been, after extensive legal wrangling, recast as a "March for Italian Pride." Some 147 of the anti-Columbus forces were arrested. But the crowds, if not the police, were on their side: Columbus's detractors outnumbered his filiopietists by as many as ten to one.

What are historians to make of such battles? We could try to plumb the bottom

of it all—to determine, for example, whether Columbus “personally invented European imperialism . . . and the transatlantic slave trade,” as the City of Berkeley’s [Indigenous Peoples’ Committee](#) maintains, or whether Plymouth’s “Pilgrims” were indeed the grave-robbing hypocrites that UAIINE describes. Is Columbus truly the moral equivalent of Hitler, as some of his critics argue? Was the “first Thanksgiving” merely a pretext for the bloodshed, enslavement, and displacement that would follow in later decades? Combing period documents and archaeological evidence, we might peel away some of the myths, inching closer to the factual core. Perhaps in this way, we might get the cultural politics off the table and leave more room for turkey.

But to do so would be to miss a fundamental point of these holidays—of Columbus Day, Thanksgiving, and their modern anti-types alike. Politics has *always* marched in the Columbus Day parade and taken a place on the Thanksgiving menu. From the very beginning. Which was when, exactly? Not 1492 or 1621. Columbus’s arrival and the first Thanksgiving were all but non-events in their own day. Both stories were rediscovered—rather, *re-invented*—in the late 18th century. The centennial and bicentennial of Columbus’s legendary voyages passed largely unmarked in the colonies. But the tricentennial, in 1792, occasioned sermons, toasts, and parades from New York to Boston. Likewise, Plymouth’s annual observance of a Thanksgiving feast, begun in the late rather than the early seventeenth century, remained a strictly local affair until 1777, when the Second Continental Congress proclaimed a national Forefathers’ Day to honor the “first comers” from Old England to New.

It is certainly no accident that these two would-be “ancient” traditions, commemorating events that took place over a century apart, sprang to life at nearly the same moment, a moment when the United States was so new as to be barely a gleam in its own eye. Nations, built as much on shared ideas as in shared spaces, demand shared stories—origins myths, as an anthropologist would say. For the infant United States, Columbus’s “discoveries” and the first Thanksgiving provided two such stories, tales that proved both powerful and flexible, as origins myths need to be. Thus in the 1860s, when the fabric of the still-young nation was nearly rent by Civil War and urban strife, Thanksgiving and Columbus Day were dusted off and retrofitted. In the 1863 proclamation that created the first national Thanksgiving, President Abraham Lincoln dedicated the day to “the whole American people,” so that they might give thanks “with one heart and one voice”—surely more a wish than a reality in the shadow of Gettysburg.

Now, in this new millenium, these sacred secular rites are once again pressed into service—this time by new nations, with new visions of the present, to be reached through new versions of the past. In place of one origins myth, the inventors of Indigenous Peoples’ Day and the National Day of Mourning invoke another. One in which all Europeans were villains and all Natives, victims. One in which indigenous peoples knew neither strife nor war until the treachery of Columbus and his cultural heirs taught them to hate and fear.

To ask whether this version is true is to ask the wrong question. It's true to its purposes. Every bit as true, that is, as the stories some Americans in 1792 and 1863 told about the events of 1492 and 1621. And that's all it needs to be. For these holidays say much less about who we really were in some specific Then, than about who we *want* to be in an ever changing Now.

In 1998, after the violence that had marked Thanksgiving the previous year, the Town of Plymouth reached a [settlement](#) with UAINE. The Town dropped all charges against the 25 protesters that had been arrested in the fall, and cleared away the procedural hurdles impeding future observances of the Day of Mourning. Plymouth also agreed to provide \$15,000 to create two large, bronze plaques, which would be prominently displayed in the town's most public, historic sites. The texts on those plaques, the settlement states, relate important chapters of "the true history of Native people." Including Thanksgiving.

Is it "true history" that Thanksgiving Day celebrates European "genocide," theft, and the "relentless assaults" Plymouth's English migrants visited upon indigenous culture? The settlement establishes that no less an authority than the Massachusetts Historical Society will "confirm the accuracy of the facts set forth in [sic] the plaque." But, the agreement continues: "No higher level of accuracy for the ancient facts set forth on the plaque will be demanded than has been required for representations that are made in the Town of Plymouth" about its own early history. The Indians' Thanksgiving needs only to meet the standard of truth set by that of the Pilgrims' eighteenth-century descendants. Turnabout, in other words, is fair play.

So have another helping of politics with your turkey. It's been there since the beginning. Whenever that was.

This article originally appeared in issue 1.2 (January, 2001).
