The True Story of Thanksgiving

By Richard B. Williams

One day in 1605, a young Patuxet Indian boy named Tisquantum and his dog were out hunting when they spotted a large English merchant ship off the coast of Plymouth, Mass. Tisquantum, who later became known as Squanto, had no idea that life as he knew it was about to change forever.

His role in helping the Pilgrims to survive the harsh New England winter and celebrate the "first" Thanksgiving has been much storied as a legend of happy endings, with the English and the Indians coming together at the same table in racial harmony. Few people, however, know the story of Squanto's sad life and the demise of his tribe as a result of its generosity. Each year, as the nation sits down to a meal that is celebrated by all cultures and races - the day we know as Thanksgiving - the story of Squanto and the fate of the Patuxet tribe is a footnote in history that deserves re-examination.

The day that Capt. George Weymouth anchored off the coast of Massachusetts, he and his sailors captured Squanto and four other tribesmen and took them back to England as slaves because Weymouth thought his financial backers "might like to see" some Indians. Squanto was taken to live with Sir Ferdinando Gorges, owner of the Plymouth Company. Gorges quickly saw Squanto's value to his company's exploits in the new world and taught his young charge to speak English so that his captains could negotiate trade deals with the Indians.

In 1614, Squanto was brought back to America to act as a guide and interpreter to assist in the mapping of the New England coast, but was kidnapped along with 27 other Indians and taken to Malaga, Spain, to be sold as slaves for about $25 a piece. When local priests learned of the fate of the Indians, they took them from the slave traders, Christianized them and eventually sent them back to America in 1618.

But his return home was short-lived. Squanto was recognized by one of Gorges' captains, was captured a third time and sent back to England as Gorges' slave. He was later sent back to New England with Thomas Dermer to finish mapping the coast, after which he was promised his freedom. In 1619, however, upon returning to his homeland, Squanto learned that his entire tribe had been wiped out by smallpox contracted from the Europeans two years before. He was the last surviving member of his tribe.

In November 1620, the Pilgrims made their now-famous voyage to the coast of Plymouth, which had previously been the center of Patuxet culture. The next year, on March 22, 1621, Squanto was sent to negotiate a peace treaty between the Wampanoag Confederation of tribes and the Pilgrims. We also know that Squanto's skills as a fisherman and farmer were crucial to the survival of the Pilgrims that first year - contributions which changed history.
But in November 1622, Squanto himself would also succumb to smallpox during a trading expedition to the Massachusetts Indians. The Patuxet, like so many other tribes, had become extinct. The lesson of Squanto and the Pilgrims is not one of bitter remembrance, but rather a celebration of the generosity of Indian people. Under the guidance of Squanto, the Pilgrims followed a longstanding Indian tradition of offering thanks. Although we celebrate Thanksgiving as an "American" holiday, its beginnings are Native to the core.

Feasts of gratitude and giving thanks have been a part of Indian culture for thousands of years. In Lakota culture, it's called a Wopila; in Navajo, it's Hozhoni; in Cherokee, it's Selu i-tse-i; and in Ho Chunk it's Wicawas warocu sto waroc. Each tribe, each Indian nation, has its own form of Thanksgiving. But for Indian culture, Thanksgiving doesn't end when the dishes are put away. It is something we celebrate all year long - at the birth of a baby, a safe journey, a new home.

So when you sit down to Thanksgiving dinner this year, remember Squanto and the great sacrifices made by him and his tribe to a people they didn't know. That is the legacy of the Indian people of New England - one that we can all enjoy.

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