

TISQUANTUM: The Origin Of Thanksgiving by Helene E. Hagen

The following story is entirely based on facts researched carefully through documents and in cooperation with the Plymouth Rock Museum of Massachusetts. The Museum hosts a bust sculpture of Tisquantum, and an outdoor full-sized stone statue Massasoit, the headman or the Wampanoag people. The story adheres strictly to the original accounts Tisquantum's life, travels, meeting with the Pilgrims and acting as mediator between their group and the Wampanoag group or Sowams led by Massasoit who joined the Pilgrims to celebrate their first harvest of corn.

As an anthropologist, I have carefully checked the facts, and have adopted a straightforward narrative in plain language, as if telling the story to an audience of young children. This is indeed a story which I hope will be shared between adults and youngsters as they prepare to celebrate Thanksgiving ceremonies in their homes.

On the Eastern shore of the continent of North America, before the coming of Europeans, there was a small village called Patuxet. The families of Patuxet formed one of the bands of the Wampanoag people who lived on the shore of the Atlantic Ocean, in an area now called Massachusetts, a word which was borrowed from their language.

One day, a British fishing ship came by and the sailors of the ship captured four men of this village. These men were taken back to England as slaves. Among them was Tisquantum, who was later nicknamed 'Squanto'.

While a slave in England, Tisquantum began to learn the language of his British master, Lord Gorges, and he told him many stories of his village, his beautiful homeland and his people. These stories were reported to friends by Sir Gorges who belonged to a group of people searching for peace and freedom of religion. They later led the first group of Pilgrims to travel across the ocean in search of the land described by Tisquantum.

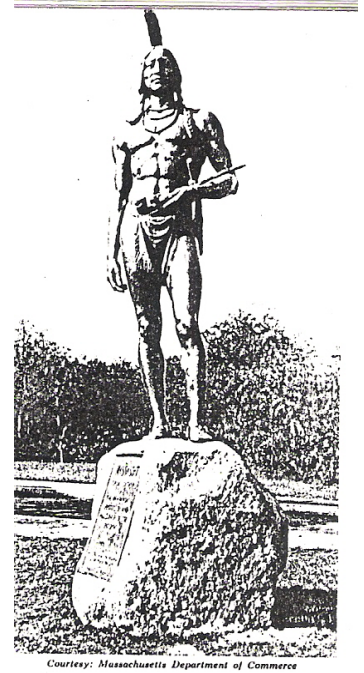
As soon as he could, Tisquantum fled and returned to America on board a British ship. Unfortunately, soon after his return, he was captured and made a slave again. This time he was sold to Spanish religious brothers. At that time, most of the Europeans were Christians. Anyone who was not a Christian was considered a 'heathen,' and could not be counted as a human being unless baptized and instructed in the ways of the Christian religion. So, the monks baptized Tisquantum.

Tisquantum again left as soon as he could, and traveled from Spain to England where he caught another ship on its way to the New World, as America was called then. But for Tisquantum, the New World was his ancestral home where all his family, friends, and forebearers had lived for thousands of years without slavery or Christian knowledge, according to the ancient **Law of Peace**.

When he landed on the shores of his ancestors, he found that the village of Patuxet no longer existed. His family, his relatives, and his friends, the whole village, had been contaminated by smallpox, brought by British sailors. Every one of the Patuxet people had died from the disease, and Tisquantum was left alone, an orphan without a home or relatives.

He walked over to the next village of the Wampanoag people, a place called Sowams, and told his story to the people of Sowams. Their chief, a 'noble' or 'headman' called Ousemaquin (later called Massasoit, which means the highest 'Headman' or 'King') took him in as an adopted child of the group, and ceremonial brother. This was in the year 1620, shortly before the arrival of the first Pilgrims to Plymouth.

Early in the spring of 1621, a man from the Sowams who also had been enslaved and learned English paid a visit to the Pilgrims. They had gone through a very cold winter and were in great need of food.



A lot of them had died during the first winter they arrived in America, and only fifty-five of them were left, hungry, destitute and afraid.

The first Pilgrims had settled on the very site of the old village Patuxet. The Indian man from Sowams saw that, and on his second visit brought back with him the only survivor from that village, Tisquantum. The Pilgrims were surprised that Tisquantum also spoke their language, and Tisquantum told them his story, how he was made a slave twice, how he had learned English, and how in his absence, everyone he loved had died from smallpox.

Because the Pilgrims did not know the plants and the roots of this strange land, Tisquantum began to teach them, about edible plants and roots. He taught them how to plant corn, the sustenance of all American Indians for centuries, and how to tap maple trees for syrup.

‘Squanto’ understood the misery of the first Pilgrims. He was himself a lonely survivor from a group which had entirely disappeared. He spent the next months teaching the Pilgrims the old Indian ways of life, from the planting of corn. (four kernels to a hillock) beans and squash, to fishing and utilizing the herring for fertilizing the planted gardens.

He taught them also the way of the **Law of Peace** which had ruled life on these shores for centuries.

Before the arrival of Europeans, the Indians celebrated the harvest of corn each year with Corn Dances and Thanksgiving Ceremonies, Under the **Great Law of Peace**, all elements are thanked in gratitude for food and the granting of life.

When Fall arrived, the Plymouth Colony decided to celebrate in the old Indian way the first abundant crop of corn which would feed them through the winter with a special feast accompanied by music and dancing.

The Pilgrims asked Tisquantum to fetch some of his Wampanoag friends to join the celebration. Tisquantum went to Sowams and came back in the company of ninety friends, to the great surprise of the pilgrims. They had abundant food prepared, but did not expect such a large company.

The Wampanoag Chief, Massasoit, sent some of his men to hunt, and they came back with five deer to provide meat for everyone. The first Thanksgiving Feast was celebrated in late October, 1621, assembling fifty-five pilgrims and ninety Wampanoag Indians. The Feast lasted three days. In addition to the deer meat, there was abundant food, ducks and geese, lobster, eel pies, corn bread and popcorn balls, a favorite food of the Wampanoag Indians who combined popped corn with maple syrup that they taught the pilgrims to gather from the maple trees. Berries and wild plums were also shared.

Thanksgiving was not celebrated the next year because the Pilgrims were not able to grow the corn so well on their own. In 1623 the feast was held in July in thanksgiving for the rain. Afterwards, for years, people celebrated their thanks for food and plenty whenever they chose to do so, and it was not until 1864 that it was declared an official national holiday by President Lincoln.

In Canada. Thanksgiving is still celebrated on the second Monday of October, as it was originally done. This is one of the many customs modern America owes to the teachings of the American Indians. In teaching the first Pilgrims, Tisquantum put aside his own grief and loss to help other human beings in distress, even though they belonged to the very group of people who had enslaved him twice and brought the disease which killed all his family.

Tisquantum displayed a generosity of heart and character which truly makes him a fine representative of his people and their legacy to the history and cultural heritage of the American people. He and his role in Thanksgiving should be remembered on this most **American** of Holidays.



The History of Tisquantum A.K.A. Squanto

Tisquantum was a native of the Patuxet tribe, which lived at present-day Plymouth, and which belonged to the Wampanoag confederation of tribes. In 1605, Captain George Weymouth led an expedition on behalf of some merchants in England, to look at the resources of North America, particularly the Canadian and New England areas. He sailed down the coast of Maine into Massachusetts, where he stopped. Thinking his financial backers in England would be interested in seeing some Indians, he decided to bring some back with him. They kidnapped two Indians in a very brutal manner, writing “we used little delay, but suddenly laid hands upon them . . . For they were strong and so naked as our best hold was by their long hair on their heads”. He had gotten three other Indians to take back to England as well, but he used bribery with them: “we gave them a can of peas and bread, which they carried to the shore to eat. But one of them brought back our can presently and staid aboard with the other two; for he being young, of a ready capacity, and one we most desired to bring with us into England, had received exceeding kind usage at our hands, and was therefore much delighted in our company.” That Indian was most likely Tisquantum.

Brought into England, Tisquantum lived with Sir Ferdinando Gorges, whose Plymouth Company had a lot of financial possibilities to exploit in the New World. Gorges kept Squanto, taught him some English, and eventually hired him to be a guide and interpreter for his sea captains who were exploring the New England coasts. In 1614, he was brought back to America, assisting some of Gorges men in the mapping of the New England coast. John Smith, after he was done mapping the Cape Cod region, left in charge a fellow captain by the name of Thomas Hunt, to trade with the Indians a little more. Once Smith had sailed off, however, Hunt promptly tricked twenty Nausets and seven Patuxets into coming on board his ship to trade—and then kidnapped them. Tisquantum, probably on board to act as an interpreter for the trades, was one of those captured. They were bound, and sailed to Malaga, Spain, where Hunt tried to sell them for slaves at £20 apiece. Some local Friars, however, discovered what was happening and took the remaining Indians from Hunt in order to instruct them in the Christian faith, thus “disappointing this unworthy fellow of the hopes of gain he conceived to make by this new & devilish project”.⁴

Tisquantum lived with the Friars until 1618 when he boarded a ship of Bristol headed for Newfoundland. When Tisquantum arrived in Newfoundland, however, he was recognized by Captain Thomas Dermer who happened to be there, and who had worked in the past for Sir Ferdinando Gorges. Thomas Dermer wrote a letter to Sir Ferdinando Gorges, stating he had found “his Indian” in Newfoundland and asked what he should do with him. Dermer brought Tisquantum back to Gorges. While in England, Gorges apparently boarded Tisquantum with Sir John Slainey, treasurer of the Newfoundland Company. After working out the details, Gorges organized a trip to send both Dermer and Tisquantum to explore the natural resources and to re-initiate trade with the Indians along the New England coast who had been angry with the English after Hunt had kidnapped members of their tribes. At the end of the expedition, Tisquantum would be returned to his home at Patuxet.

Dermer and Tisquantum thus became very closely associated with one another. They worked together mapping the resources of the New England coast. When they arrived at Patuxet in 1619, Dermer and Tisquantum soon found out that the entire Patuxet tribe had been wiped out in a plague in 1617. Squanto was the only Patuxet left alive, so he moved in with a neighboring tribe that lived at Pokanoket—the home of Wampanoag sachem Massasoit. Dermer continued on, and while at Cape Cod, he and his crew were attacked by Nausets, and Dermer was taken hostage. Squanto heard about the incident, and came to his friend’s aid, and negotiated his safe release. Dermer would later be attacked by Indians near Martha’s Vineyard, and would die of his wounds after reaching Virginia.

Just little more than a year after Tisquantum was returned to his homeland, the Pilgrims arrived—in November 1620. After the Pilgrim explorers checked out all of the surrounding regions, they finally decided to settle at Plymouth in late December. Little did they know that just a couple years ago, Plymouth had been center of the Patuxet tribe. Two months after settling at Plymouth, an Indian visiting from Maine, by the name of Samoset, walked right into the middle of the Colony which was being built, and welcomed the Pilgrims in English. Somewhat fearful and somewhat astounded, the Pilgrims and Samoset talked all day and night. After Samoset had led several tradings with the Pilgrims, he told the Wampanoag living at Pokanoket that the Pilgrims wanted to make a peace with them. Massasoit sent Tisquantum to be interpreter, and on March 22, 1621, the Pilgrims met Squanto for the first time. That day, Squanto negotiated a peace treaty between Massasoit and the Wampanoag, and John Carver and the Pilgrims. It essentially stated that the Wampanoag and the Pilgrims would not harm each other, and they became a military alliance as well, such that if one were attacked, the other would come to the aid.

Tisquantum lived out the rest of his life in the Plymouth Colony. He befriended the Pilgrims, and taught them how to manure their corn, where to catch fish and eels, and acted as their interpreter and guide. Without Squanto’s help, the Pilgrims would probably have had severe famine over the next year, and would have lived in constant fear of their Indian neighbors—Indians who were actually quite peaceful, but who had been rightfully angered by the cruel treatment they received from many English ship captains like Thomas Hunt.

Tisquantum did not help the Pilgrims solely because he was a nice and caring individual. By late 1621 he was using his position with the Pilgrims for his own gain—threatening many Indians that if they did not do as he told them, he would have the Pilgrims “release the plague” against them. As with all humans, “power corrupts”. When Massasoit learned that Tisquantum was abusing his position to steal power, he demanded Squanto be turned over to him to be executed. The Pilgrims were required to turn Squanto over, according to the peace treaty they had signed with one another. But the Pilgrims felt they needed Squanto’s services, so they stalled—until an English ship came onto the horizon, and distracted everyone’s attention for awhile. But in November 1622, while on a trading expedition to the Massachusetts Indians, Tisquantum came down with Indian fever, his nose began to bleed, and he died. Governor William Bradford, perhaps Squanto’s closest friend and associate among the Pilgrims, wrote the following about his sudden death:

In this place Squanto fell sick of an Indian fever, bleeding much at the nose (which the Indians take for a symptom of death) and within a few days died there; desiring the Governor to pray for him that he might go to the Englishman's God in Heaven; and bequeathed sundry of his things to sundry of his English friends as remembrances of his love; of whom they had great loss.

Thanksgiving is the most "American" of holidays. Its roots go back before there was any such thing as America, and is rooted in the gratitude of the people who were here first -- it is in short a Native American Holiday -- "Borrowed" like everything else from the Indigenous inhabitants of the New World as Europeans called it then. It is quite a different story from that so oft told to school children where in the nice Pilgrims invited the savage Indians to join them for a gracious repast. But then again so much of history is mythological and storybook -- the real history lies mostly ignored in the dusty archives. In the spirit of retelling the story wherein the Indigenous people are not cast as the heavies, as well as in the interest of a fair and truthful understanding, I share with you Helene Hagen's telling of the story of the first Thanksgiving. Helene Hagen was a French citizen born in Morocco in the late 1930s. She immigrated to the United States and was educated as an anthropologist. Her efforts were far more sympathetic than most of this profession. So, please find attached the story of the Origin of Thanksgiving, and as you give thanks this year, thank an Indian as well for all that Indigenous Americans have given you both freely and not so freely...

Some other sources for the Squanto story may be found at these url sites:

http://www.facebook.com/note.php?note_id=148898585137521&id=100434276675487

<http://www.cupids400.com/english/about/squanto.php>

<http://news.holidash.com/2010/11/17/who-was-squanto/>

<http://www.helium.com/items/1630082-Colonial-Early-American>

<http://www.rense.com/general45/thanks.htm>

References

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- Bradford, W. Of Plymouth Plantation, 1620-1647. New York: Modern Library 1981 (1856). [1]
- Gorges, Ferdinand. "A Briefe Relation of the Discovery and Plantation of New England," in Baxter 1890, I:203-40 (1622).
- Morton, T. New English Canaan, or New Canaan. London: Charles Green, 1637.
- Winslow, E. Good Newes from New-England: or A True Relation of Things Very Remarkable at the Plantation of Plimoth in New-England. London: William Bladen and John Bellamie, 1624

