



History can reveal some interesting surprises...

As another year draws to a close, we think about counting our blessings and enjoying familiar traditions. Now that Mom has finished packing away the autumn decorations and the serving platter with the turkey on it (*Yes, virtually every family has one!*), we invite you to take a moment to think about the first Thanksgiving in this country.

We picture somber-clad Pilgrims as they left their cramped shipboard accommodations and stepped onto a stack of rocks along the Massachusetts coast on November 21, 1620. The story continues that the travelers were warmly welcomed by a tribe of friendly Indians who generously shared an elaborate feast with them.

There's just one thing wrong with this popular imagery...that was NOT the first Thanksgiving in this country -- not by quite a long shot! This isn't "revisionist history" -- actual facts confirm that 500-600 years ago a whole lot was going on in this country OUTSIDE of the "original" east coast colonies! There are even more surprises in our history!

In a special supplement on Native Americans, National Geographic included some astonishing information: "Long before 16th century Europeans began to explore what would become known as North America, the land was already home to more than 30 million people by some estimates. With diverse languages and cultures they lived in thousands of communities, some established for centuries."

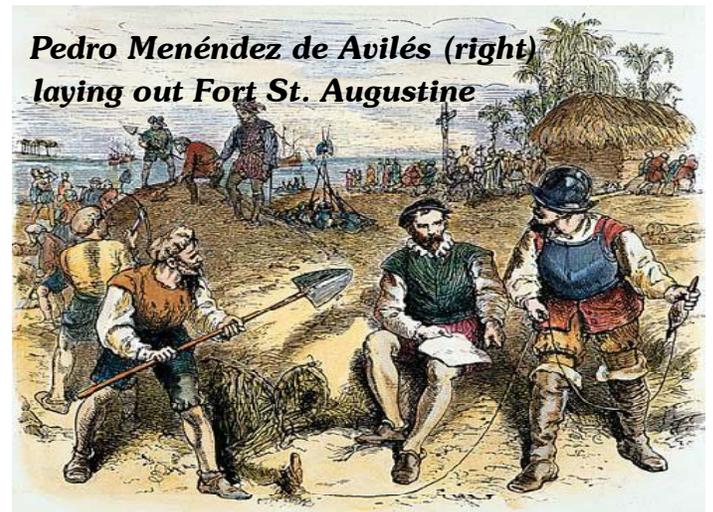


Christopher Columbus

That being said...it's quite a stretch to think that Columbus "discovered" much of anything in North America...millions of Americans were already here by the time he arrived!

Back to the first Thanksgiving. The concept of Thanksgiving has always been a part of the European culture and religion, and included celebrations of various "feast" days. It is logical that explorers from England and Spain would bring their traditions with them when they came to the "New World".

There are also many contenders for being the "first explorers" of this continent -- including the Vikings, and Siberians who arrived on foot over the land bridge that formed across the Bering Sea at the end of the Ice Age. Virginians insist that they celebrated the first Thanksgiving in their Jamestown colony, founded in 1610, after surviving an especially harsh winter. But there is some compelling evidence that this credit should fall instead to Spanish explorers...



Pedro Menéndez de Avilés (right) laying out Fort St. Augustine

If we think about early explorations in what is Florida today, just about everyone will come up with the name Ponce de Leon...who came in search of the Fountain of Youth in March, 1513. This state actually has the distinction of holding the *first* Thanksgiving on September 7, 1565. Pedro Menéndez de Avilés, the Spanish founder of St. Augustine, and 800 of his settlers celebrated a Thanksgiving Mass that was followed by a communal meal shared by the Spaniards and the Timucuan natives who lived there when the explorers landed. The natives were

initially friendly to the Spanish, and they existed side by side for a number of years, before European diseases took a terrible toll on the Timucua.

Another historical surprise...

But wait. There's more. The second Thanksgiving occurred on April 30, 1598 in TEXAS -- before Capt. John Smith sailed from England or before the Pilgrims' Mayflower had even been built!

On January 26, 1598 a man that some historians have dubbed *The Last Conquistador*, Don Juan de Oñate, won permission from Spain's king, Philip II, to explore and colonize what is now New Mexico. Here is a man whose name should be as familiar to us as Jamestown's Captain John Smith or the Puritan Governor William Bradford. Oñate was from a noble Basque Spanish family that had become very wealthy in the New World in silver mining, their ranches, and his father's marriage to an heiress. Don Juan was not born in Spain, however, but was born in Zacatecas, Mexico around 1550, which made him a *criollo* -- a Spaniard not born in Spain. He also became wealthy like his father, but as a *criollo*, "real" Spaniards considered him to be physically, mentally, and morally inferior, so he worked twice as hard to attain his wealth and stature.

After suffering a number of setbacks, Don Juan assembled 400 men and their families, ox carts, carriages and wooden-wheel wagons, 7,000 to 8,000 head of livestock (horses, sheep, goats, and long-horn cattle), along with some Franciscan priests, and set out from Santa Barbara, Chihuahua, Mexico traveling in a four-mile-long procession across the desert.

It was a long, arduous journey...one that almost defeated them. Don Oñate (at age 43) set out to establish a short, direct route to his destination through 200 miles of the Chihuahuan desert. This trail ultimately became the famous El Camino Real.

The expedition dealt with extremes -- raging rivers or no water at all -- and by the time they reached the banks of the Rio Grande, men and animals alike were exhausted and crazed with thirst. Don Oñate called a halt, and they rested for a week along the river bank as scouts searched for a suitable place to cross the river. They were at the site of present-day El Paso, Texas.



Offering thanks for survival...

It was on April 30, 1598 that Oñate instructed the Franciscan priests to celebrate a solemn high Mass, the first Thanksgiving celebration in New Spain. Then Don Juan held the ritual (both secular and religious) of La Toma -- the formal ceremony of taking new land for the King of Spain. The conquistador and his army arrived on horseback, their armor polished and shining, and with a trumpet fanfare and musket shots, they raised the Spanish flag with a flourish in the camp. The colonists, priests and soldiers who had so nearly perished were triumphant and devoted the remainder of the day in giving thanks, feasting on fish, "many cranes, ducks and geese" and enjoying games, foot races, and competitive sports.

After the celebration, Oñate's expedition continued up the Rio Grande and subsequently occupied the Acoma Pueblo near Santa Fe.

As of April 1989, the residents of El Paso enjoy The *El Paso Mission Trail Association's* yearly re-enactment of the arrival of Oñate's first Spanish settlers in the area in April 1598 and their Thanksgiving celebration. A company of costumed actors and dancers represent the Native Americans and Spaniards, who give thanks and celebrate after their perilous crossing of the Chihuahuan desert and arrival at the banks of the Rio Grande. ■

*The expeditions of the Spanish Conquistadors are included in the water conservation education program, **LEARNING FROM OUR PAST TO INFLUENCE OUR FUTURE**, sponsored by the San Jacinto River Authority in Conroe ISD elementary and middle schools.*