

Shattering the myth of the first Thanksgiving

**The Wampanoags shared the gifts of the land.
The colonists responded with greed and
ingratitude.**

by [Jane McBride](#) in the [November 18, 2020](#) issue

In Review



This Land Is Their Land

The Wampanoag Indians, Plymouth Colony, and the Troubled History of Thanksgiving

By David J. Silverman

Bloomsbury

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Thanks to a distant cousin's genealogy research, I know the name of my ancestor who arrived on the Mayflower. The church I serve in Minneapolis was founded by a Congregational missionary from the East Coast. So I read David Silverman's new book with a keen awareness that colonialism is my birthright.

This Land Is Their Land begins by shattering the myth of the first Thanksgiving. As the story typically goes, the relationship between the Wampanoags and the Plymouth colonists was one of friendship, sealed with a feast of mutual gratitude. The United States was founded on this goodwill, with the blessing of God. For generations, schoolchildren have rehearsed this myth with pageants featuring Pilgrim hats, Indian feathers, and turkey crafts.

But Silverman, a history professor at George Washington University, summarizes the true relationship between the Wampanoags and the Europeans this way:

The European mariners called "explorers" by historians were in fact slavers who raided the Wampanoag coast for years before the Pilgrims' arrival, capturing people for sale to distant places of which they had never heard. The Plymouth colonists were no better, despite their claims to piety. They introduced themselves to the Wampanoags by desecrating graves and robbing seed corn from underground storage barns.

Seeking to counter our toxic national lie, contemporary Wampanoag people declared a day of mourning on Thanksgiving Day 1970.

Indeed, there's a lot to mourn in the pages of this book. As we weather the COVID-19 pandemic, it's not hard to imagine the terror the Wampanoag people must have felt as an unknown disease ripped through their communities between 1616 and 1619, leaving a devastating silence in the historical record. "Reeling from their losses to an unforgiving epidemic and under relentless pressure from neighboring tribes," Silverman observes, the Wampanoag leaders decided to collaborate with the

colonists.

Only such conditions would lead them to look for help from English strangers whose nation had a lengthy track record of attacking and enslaving the people. It was not innate friendliness or a directive from God to assist Christians that drove the Wampanoags to reach out to the English. Rather, they were desperate.

Despite their vulnerability to illness, the Wampanoags were the stronger people when the Europeans first arrived. The native people could have easily driven the colonists away. Their leader, Ousamequin, made an agonized, controversial, and strategic decision that the two peoples could help one another flourish.

The Wampanoags who created this alliance with the English “planned for the two peoples to live side by side.” When the native people sold land, “some deeds required the English to pay tribute to the local sachem (chief), as if they were joining Wampanoag society rather than buying the land from out of it, which is doubtlessly how the Wampanoags conceived of these arrangements.” The expectation of the native people was not that they were relinquishing all rights to the land. They believed they were sharing the gifts of the land—and sharing in the responsibility to care for it.

The Wampanoags acted with creativity and strength to survive the trauma of the epidemics and the colonists’ betrayals. Yet, as Silverman repeatedly shows, the Europeans refused to see the Wampanoags and other native peoples of the area as whole people, with complex and nuanced cultures.

Silverman provides ample evidence of the rootless and morally bankrupt faith the colonists held. They viewed the terrible series of epidemics as God’s way of wiping out the “savages” to make room for their “civilization.” The Wampanoags who adopted Christianity often did so in the grip of fear. They believed they had no choice but to bow to the God who punished them with sickness. And they hoped that their acceptance of the Christian faith would protect them from the hostility of the colonists.

At the same time, there is some possibility of transformation embedded in the story. Silverman writes, “Christian Wampanoags were unequivocal that they considered the faith not as something brand-new but as a fresh source to rediscover ancient

spiritual power and protection lost to them because of the deaths of so many elders during the epidemics.” He explains that because they used the Wampanoag language to express the ideas of Christianity, they “turned the missionaries’ religion into a new way to express indigenous truths.” The survival of these truths within Wampanoag Christianity shows that when two traditions meet, the destruction of one by the other isn’t the only possible result.

But the colonists worked hard to destroy Wampanoag culture. Silverman points out that even as Whites believed “black blood” was “polluting,” they held that the blood of native people was “weak.” Therefore, through intermarriage, native people could be made to disappear. This racist ideology ignored the Wampanoags’ own sense of continuing cultural identity. The final step in this attempted genocide was to force US citizenship on Wampanoags and to divide their common lands into individual pieces of property.

As I read *This Land Is Their Land*, my heart grew heavier with each chapter. Silverman writes about the inevitable war and the Wampanoags’ resounding defeat, the hundreds of native people executed and thousands sold into slavery, the kidnapping of children and the loss of languages, the generations trapped in cycles of debt and poverty.

I mourn that in the myth of the first Thanksgiving, the role of the first peoples is to protect and welcome the newcomers, to give them their land, and then to disappear, silently fading into history. I mourn the ways in which my colonial ancestors’ greed, violence, and exploitation have become part of my DNA and that of the church I serve. I mourn the irony that even as we remember the colonists with a day of Thanksgiving, it is the ingratitude of their behavior that has so deeply shaped us.

And yet, I’ve also found reasons for gratitude within this mourning. Despite all the attempts of colonizers past and present to demean, kill, betray, enslave, and erase native people, they are still here. In recent years, the Wampanoags fought for, and received, federal recognition for their remaining communities. They are reviving their language, recovering some of their land, and reclaiming their sovereignty.

The survival of indigenous people is good in itself, as is their continuing stewardship of land, language, and ceremony. I want to resist the impulse to appropriate a spirituality that does not belong to me. At the same time, I’m longing for dialogue and an accountable relationship with the first peoples of this land, because I am aware that the process of colonization has wounded something in me and my

tradition, something that I want to reclaim. I believe there is an indigenous way of being Christian that is my lost inheritance. I imagine what could still be.