

Corn: A Cultural Shift in American Identity Due to Severe Food Insecurity

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Abstract

The story of Thanksgiving is a more complicated and complex story than the tale of peaceful beginnings that is typically associated with the Pilgrims' meals shared with Native Americans. The story of the pilgrims' first years included tragic death, severe food insecurity and a politically charged meal that brought enemies together. The first Thanksgiving is a tale of a dramatic shift in American identity and culture as pilgrims struggled to survive in a harsh, unfamiliar world. Corn, a food source associated with poverty, simplicity and demeaned as "native" and unworthy of European palettes became a central staple in the diet and a central feature in a shared American identity. Yet, it was the death of half the colony and lack of preparation (as they faced starvation and uncertainty) that introduced corn to the American diet. Today, corn has become interwoven into our diet and American consumerism. My paper documents this surprising and dramatic shift and follows the corn as it goes from a hated food source to become an integral iconic part of the American identity.

Fifty died so this food could feed billions. Many people know of the Mayflower voyage from England as an escape from religious persecution and the start of a new life in a new world. As the story goes, the Pilgrims befriended the Native Americans and by the following November, they were celebrating Thanksgiving arm in arm, tables abundant with corn, turkey, and squash. While this is a sweet story, it is hardly a realistic representation of the Pilgrims' first year at Plymouth, during which the Pilgrims suffered hardship and loss, due to their inability to adapt their English values and indignant attitudes toward the Native Americans and realities of the environment and climate. For the Pilgrims, their story was one of food insecurity and how they would adopt their diet to a changing situation. The behaviors and values of the Native Americans directly contrasted with those of the Pilgrims. After a traumatic winter and the desperate realization that they were failing, the Pilgrims were forced to compromise their culture and food practices for their survival. One practice in particular would be vital to the survival of the Plymouth Colony—the production and consumption of corn. A seemingly simple solution as a response to an ecological stressor was actually a radical change in food culture. Originally seen as savage and a food for animals, corn became a means of survival and its adoption required the Pilgrims to change their food values. Corn was such a deviation from the English values and it would become so important to the New World colonies that fifty years after its adoption into the New England diet, a representative of the colony would travel back to Europe to convince English society of the virtues of corn and argue its acceptance into the diet as an alternative for wheat (McWilliams 55). Corn would go

from a hated food to become an integral part of the American identity, immortalizing as an icon in the quintessential Thanksgiving picture.

From England, the Pilgrims brought with them seeds and livestock to fuel their new lives in the New World. These foods included peas, wheat, English grass, various vegetables, cows, pigs, and chickens (Philbrick 64). Also, they planned to produce cider, beer, and rum. These English foods were a part of their cultural identity. However, upon arrival, the Pilgrims quickly learned that the New England landscape, though green and fertile, would be hard to work. Many of their seeds would not grow in the New World, and the ones that did yielded little (Deetz 3). With a lack of sufficient grass for the livestock, dairy was unavailable in the winter as well (McWilliams 59). The Pilgrims tried to replicate their way of life in England, it was all they knew in an unfamiliar world. It must have been a cultural shock and hardship when those plans did not work (McWilliams 63). It became obvious just how far from home and alone the Pilgrims were, and that failing meant death for the whole colony. It would take perseverance and adaption to keep the colony alive.

When the first winter arrived, the Pilgrims suffered. They were in unfamiliar territory and their scouting parties yielded little information. They landed in Plymouth without knowing what the land would look like or where the best place to settle would be. It took three weeks for the Pilgrims to move off the boat, and by that time snow covered the ground and supplies were dwindling (Deetz 55). It was during these first expeditions that the Pilgrims encountered American corn, stored in empty Native American huts. Knowing their supplies were dwindling and uncertain of the fertility of the soil, the Pilgrims stole some of the corn seed for future use, willing to try anything to survive (Philbrick 64). The unique quality of American corn that made it especially valuable to the Pilgrims was that the dry seed would keep indefinitely, so they could store it for the winter and it would be good to plant in the spring (Philbrick 62). The Pilgrims viewed corn as food for the livestock and unfit for human consumption. It was a marker of the Native American society as savage, among other practices that conflicted with the Pilgrim values. The Pilgrims' way of life included a division of labor in the family household, where women worked in the house and men worked out-

side (McWilliams 11). The Pilgrims saw the Native Americans as primitive and uncivilized because the women did most of their work outside in the gardens, while the men went off hunting for game or fishing (McWilliams 9). Yet, the Native Americans did well for themselves, surviving off the land's resources and supplementing with their own vegetable gardens that grew in abundance (McWilliams 59). The Pilgrims would suffer heavy losses and despair before they would face the realization that the Native Americans were better adapted to surviving and being successful in the New England environment.

In a land that appeared plentiful, the Pilgrims faced food insecurity, meaning they did not have access to "nutritionally adequate and safe foods or... [the] ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways" (USDA 2017). Corn was defined a savage food, considered dirty and unfit to eat, yet on their own they did not have enough food, much less enough of the right food. Confronted with food insecurity, the Pilgrims were forced to adopt the native food. This was a major cultural shift for them; they had to trust in a food that was unknown and eaten by people considered to be savage.

The adoption of Native American practices was vital to the Pilgrim's survival, but it did not come easily or without compromise. The Pilgrims were ill-adapted to survive the harsh first winter. Its many storms prevented the Pilgrims from building homes and kept them on the ships much longer than planned (Philbrick 60). From December through February, half the colony died. This reduced their labor force significantly, and induced desperation in the spring. Without any other options and fear their own seeds would not grow in the tough soil, the Pilgrims were in despair. Far from home with no other options, the Pilgrims faced a cultural crisis. If they stayed true to their English values the entire colony would die, but to survive meant lowering themselves to what they believed was the level of savages and eating food meant for animals. The decision to change their cultural practices was not simple. The Pilgrims recognized the success of the Native Americans in their food production, and they began to adopt some of the Native American practices, realizing the need for the rest of the colony to survive as greater than preserving the English cultural behaviors.

After the first winter, the Pilgrims were desperate to plant. The tragedy of losing fifty percent

of the colony's population encouraged them to turn to the Native Americans for help, adopting some of their practices. These practices included the adoption hunting game and growing beans, squash, and corn (Fischer et al. 90). Corn, in the northeast, is a versatile and hardy crop. It grows well in the hard soil and is easy to manage, freeing time for other activities (McWilliams 8). The Native Americans were vital in providing knowledge of the land and its resources to the Pilgrims, with whom they negotiated a peace treaty. The Native Americans assisted the Pilgrims in learning how to work the hard soil and grow corn, among other crops. The Pilgrims learned to fertilize the soil with fish, which allowed corn, beans, and squash to grow in abundance (Philbrick 102). Previous to this new practice, the Pilgrims' own crops did poorly, planted in neat rows in the unfertilized soil, unlike the successful Native American practice of scattering seeds haphazardly. The adaptability and willingness to compromise previous cultural practices allowed the Pilgrims to survive after the first winter and begin to build a colony and a new home.

At the end of the harvest period in 1621, the Pilgrims held a three-day festival and invited the local Native Americans as guests, initiating the first Thanksgiving. The harvest for that season was small, but yielded enough to celebrate, and central in this celebration was corn (Deetz 64). This festival became known as the first Thanksgiving and it represented a cultural shift from remaking the English way of life, to founding their own way in the New World, with corn at the center of this picture. The cultural adaptations the Pilgrims were forced to make in response to ecological hardship would become an identity, ingrained in the colony's history. Corn would become a representation of the perseverance and survival of the Pilgrims, and that success would not come easy to those who would not work for it. These Pilgrim values became American values as Thanksgiving became an annual celebration of the success of a colony once doomed to fail.

From a perspective of the study of food and culture, it is shocking that a culture would adopt a food practice that was seen as barbaric. The Pilgrims' culture shunned corn because it was a food for animals, turning to it only as a way of survival. The Native Americans taught the Pilgrims how to plant crops that would grow in the hard, New England soil, including corn. Food insecurity is not

just a lack of food, but also a lack of the right food. For the Pilgrims, the food insecurity they faced was a combination of the two. They lacked sufficient amount of food because their crops grew poorly. They also lacked the right food because even though they had stolen corn seeds from the Naussets during their winter explorations, they refused to produce and consume the corn for themselves. It takes a drastic event to change food practices in a culture. Faced with losing the entire colony, the Pilgrims fought for their lives by adopting corn into their diet. At the first "Thanksgiving," a three-day harvest festival, corn sat on the table as a miracle crop, saving the Pilgrims from another deadly winter.

After the first Thanksgiving, corn grew to become a central staple in the American diet. In modern times, it is produced in copious amounts and used in a multitude of consumer products, not just as a food source. Corn has become a central Thanksgiving dish as well, never absent from the table. What was once consumed as a necessity for survival is now a beloved, quintessential American dish. There are even multiple types of corn dishes that adorn the Thanksgiving menu, including corn bread, corn pudding, sweet corn, and corn on the cob. The importance of corn today reflects its importance to the Pilgrims at that first Thanksgiving. Without corn, the Plymouth Colony may have failed, and the holiday Americans celebrate today may not have existed. The changes in culture the Pilgrims underwent to survive a time of food insecurity were significant in creating a part of the American identity.

Ironically, the food that helped the Pilgrims through their time of food insecurity has become perverted in today's society to create food insecurity. Corn is extremely starchy and thus difficult for the body to process (Lustig, Schmidt, and Brindis 2012). For a starving population, it is a great food. In a population that already runs rampant with diabetes and obesity, the manufactured derivatives of corn only add to the overarching problem society has to face. Corn has been manipulated into less-healthy corn by-products, such as corn starch, corn syrup, and other high sugar by-products that are present in most foods found in grocery stores today. Corn has become engrained in American culture and scaling back on its production and consumption or replacing it with a healthier food would be extremely difficult. What once was shunned as an insufficient

food source has become an integral ingredient in the American diet and identity.

The introduction of corn into the Pilgrim diet was a direct result of the tragedy they suffered during the first winter at Plymouth. The desperation they felt after losing half the colony's population and the food insecurity they faced caused a cultural shift to adopt corn into their diet, rather than to limit it to livestock feed. This was a cultural response as much as an ecological response to the food insecurity they faced. Many people starved and died before the Pilgrims made a cultural shift, emphasizing that a drastic event is required for a people to dramatically change their values and food staples. The Pilgrims were forced to adapt to the ways of which they considered savage. The value of corn went from feed for livestock, to a necessity for survival, to a vaulted commodity. In time, corn became an integral part of the American diet, as it was easy to grow in the hard, New England soil. It continued to become a part of the American identity, cemented in the history of the Plymouth Colony. Corn has since become central in the iconic perception of the first Thanksgiving and is considered an American staple. It is a food that links to the American culture and identity to its roots in the Plymouth Colony.

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