

TURKEYS AT PLYMOUTH FARE AND FOWL

by Elizabeth Gawthrop Riely



When the *Mayflower* landed at Plymouth in December 1620, abundant game on the new continent — furred, feathered and finny — greeted the arrivals.

Among the birds were an estimated 10 million wild turkeys, a number impossible for us to establish and even harder to imagine. One early Plymouth colonist, astonished by the large flocks of wild turkeys passing by his doorway, asked an Indian how many were to be found in the forest on a given day. “*Neent Matawna*” was the reply in his Wampanoag language, “a thousand a day.” Whether or not that figure was metaphorical, “the plenty of them is such in those parts,” the chronicler wrote.

Today more and more Americans know that the First Thanksgiving is a myth as we continue to create our sense of heritage. The

one and only firsthand account of that harvest feast, thanksgiving spelled in lower case, is a letter written by Edward Winslow in 1621 where he mentions “fowl.” To his friend in England he wrote from Plymouth, “our harvest being gotten in, our governor sent four men on fowling, so that so we might after a special manner rejoice together after we had gathered the fruit of our labors. They four in one day killed as much fowl as, with a little help beside, served the company almost a week.” The passage continues, naming deer and Indians — but no cranberries, no pumpkin pie and no turkeys by name. Those “fowl” were probably wild ducks and geese as well as turkeys, all of them plentiful, but we cannot know specifically.

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The wild turkey in the region of Plymouth in 1621 was *Meleagris gallopavo silvestris*, otherwise known as the eastern wild turkey. This true American native inhabited a vast swath of the continent, what is now most of the eastern half of the United States, excluding Florida. The bird thrived in the hardwood forests of New England among the oak, hickory, beech, walnut and chestnut trees. During the region's cold winters, roosting in trees and walking atop the crusty snow, the non-migrating turkey managed to find enough mast (nuts) and berries to survive until spring.

The little band of Puritans from the *Mayflower* undoubtedly hunted this turkey to put food on their tables and in their stomachs. After that first winter in which they struggled for survival, they were grateful for its abundance. They also liked the large size of the wild turkey that, boiled or roasted, provided a generous amount of dark, flavorful, nourishing meat.

M.g. silvestris then and now is striking for its typically dark brown plumage, with tail feathers tipped chestnut or dark chocolate, with black or white bars. The body feathers are accentuated by coppery bronze with flashes of red or green iridescence. The male's bald head has white, blue and red skin with wattle, the colors changing especially in mating season. The hen is duller in color, usually with more feathers on the head, and sometimes with the black beard that males always have on the chest.

As early as 1629, ships from England supplied the Massachusetts colonies with domesticated turkeys of a very different sort. Incredible as it seems, these imported turkeys were descended from birds introduced to Europe by Spanish explorers a century earlier. The docile, smaller birds caused a sensation and quickly caught on, bred and spread throughout Europe both as a status symbol and as a tastier alternative to peacock. These turkeys with a Continental upbringing came from another subspecies of wild turkey brought back by the Spaniards from Mexico and Central America, where the Aztecs had already domesticated them and raised them extensively.

The tame domestic turkeys, probably a breed that was later standardized in England as the Norfolk Black, were easy for the settlers to keep near their houses and on their farms. There were occasional complaints in town of some that escaped their pens,



but not enough for serious concern. Meanwhile, the native birds had not yet learned to be wary of the colonists. But considering gunfire, and woodland being cleared for new settlements and farmlands, agricultural practices by the colonists were different indeed from those of the Wampanoags. Wild turkeys were beginning to lose their habitat. By 1640, some people noticed that the numbers of wild turkeys were seriously decreasing around Plymouth. Over the next century colonists established yet more towns, so that by the 1730s wild turkeys in coastal New England neared extinction. The last in Massachusetts was shot on Mount Tom, overlooking the Connecticut River, in 1851.

Crossing the eastern wild turkey with domesticated turkeys introduced from England created a new breed later named the Narragansett, for the region where it was developed. This was the main turkey breed of New England, also well known in the mid-Atlantic and mid-western states, throughout the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries. Its beautiful and distinctive coloration is predominantly black, gray, tan and white. The steely metallic cast of its body feathers is set off by white stripes on tail and wings, also by the red wattle and white head.

Colonists liked the Narragansett turkey for many reasons. This big, hardy breed produced a lot of eggs and flavorful meat. Its large flocks didn't stray; ate the crickets, grasshoppers and other insects that might harm crops; and needed little feed. The hens



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were “broody”: good layers who took care of their poults (chicks). Farmers valued Narragansetts for their calm disposition and early maturation. As the breed was improved and standardized, a full-grown tom might weigh 22 to 29 pounds, a hen 12 to 16.

Harvest celebrations were occasionally declared during the 17th century. These holidays, religious and family-centered, were held during the week at home, so as not to compete with the Sabbath. The table at such an occasion in Plymouth would be graced with a Narragansett turkey, along with other meats, especially chicken and pork. Fish and shellfish played a part as well, also corn — not the sweet summer green corn we eat on the cob but rather the staple maize or flint corn, whose meal was ground for puddings and porridges prepared in the English style. The first reference to cranberries was in 1643, by Roger Williams, but he used the Narragansett word, *sasemineash*, rather than “cranberry.” The scarlet cranberry and orange pumpkin kept well in cool autumn weather, along with nuts and root vegetables. By mid 17th century, hard cider or beer was the drink for all men, women and children.

During the 18th century, this harvest dinner gradually became more elaborate and less austere but not yet a ritual celebration. In 1841 Massachusetts chronicler Alexander Young discovered the 1621 letter written by Edward Winslow and called that feast “The First Thanksgiving,” even suggesting the menu and turkey’s place on it. Especially in the Northeast, this eventually was formalized into Thanksgiving Dinner — capitalized. Idealized descriptions in the New England novels of writers like Harriet Beecher Stowe and Sarah Josepha Hale set the image of what it should be, drawing on their childhood memories, as by mid-century the slavery question intensified.

For some 40 years the influential Hale began her campaign to have Thanksgiving declared a national holiday for the whole country. She saw it as a way to draw the nation together over the divisions from the question of slavery. President Lincoln declared it so in 1863 during the Civil War and set it on the last Thursday in November (changed by Franklin Roosevelt to the fourth Thursday). After the war, upheavals and industrialization brought waves of immigrants from many parts of the world. In their own ways

they used this unique holiday to forge identities in their newly American heritage.

Farmers found a new interest in breeding poultry in the later 19th century, developing several varieties that we now call heritage turkeys. The American Bronze, larger than the Narragansett, became extremely popular. When crossed with the Holland White, a new strain was created that transformed the market, especially as turkeys began to be sold by the pound rather than the bird. This turkey, named the Broad-Breasted Bronze in 1938, took well to the new technology of freezing whole or in parts, as in TV dinners (1953). Starting in the 1960s, its exaggerated figure — short legs and large breast for the white meat Americans had come to prefer — necessitated reproduction by artificial insemination, so it was no longer a heritage bird. The still newer Broad-Breasted White superseded it to become the industry choice, which was raised in close confinement. Its blander flavor required “all the trimmings” on the Thanksgiving table.

As for the Narragansett turkey, in 1938 this heritage breed remained popular, as almost ten percent of the American turkey farmers’ crop. By 1999, however, a census counted only six breeding Narragansetts in the entire country. By 2006 efforts by the American Livestock Breeds Conservancy and others increased that number to 868, making the breed no longer “rare” but “threatened,” a remarkable achievement.

Ironically, as the iconic American bird became ever more industrialized, the wild turkey faced extinction. In the 1930s, the budding conservation movement and the disuse of small farms during the Depression allowed the return of shrubs and trees that form its habitat. In 1951, after several failures, state wildlife agencies found that flocks trapped in nets and moved elsewhere — a method adapted from the Native Americans — succeeded. In this way, and with the help of under-appreciated hunters, the wild turkey has been restored, a near-tragedy turned into triumph.

This fall you may see a few of Massachusetts’s 20,000 *M.g. silvestris* in your backyard or along the roadside. If you haven’t a hunter in your circle of friends, a Narragansett or other heritage bird would make a fine centerpiece on your Thanksgiving table. More likely, a bird raised on a local poultry farm will grace your table, along with cranberry sauce and all the trimmings. Share your favorite dishes with family and friends, as we continue to recreate this great and mythic American holiday.

See www.ediblesouthshore.com for turkey resources in our area.

Elizabeth Gawthrop Riely edits the Radcliffe Culinary Times, published by the Schlesinger Library. Her dictionary, The Chef’s Companion (John Wiley & Sons) is in its 3rd edition, marking changes in the edible landscape.



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