

I've been working my way through Ken Burns' sweeping new PBS documentary *The American Revolution*, all twelve hours of it. Even just a few episodes in, one theme stands out: Indigenous people were deeply and strategically involved on both sides of the conflict. Their choices, often reduced or omitted in textbooks, shaped the war far more than I realized. But on this post-Thanksgiving morning, it feels right to start a little earlier—with a personal memory that has helped shape my sense of this history.

Years ago, I visited Plimoth Patuxet Museum, the remarkable living-history site just south of Boston that interprets both the English colony of Plymouth and the neighboring Wampanoag homeland. The museum places visitors inside a wondrously recreated 17th-century English village and a Wampanoag encampment, where colonial and Indigenous cultural educators speak in the present tense about their traditions, technologies, and survival. During our visit, interpreters were plucking a turkey for supper, repairing a thatched roof, and harvesting corn. Standing in those spaces, you can feel how fragile and complicated the beginnings of the American story truly were.

That complexity extends to "the First Thanksgiving." The familiar image of long tables, buckle shoes and pumpkin pies is mostly a creation of 19th-century nostalgia. The 1621 gathering wasn't even called "Thanksgiving," but was a three-day harvest celebration rooted in English autumn festivals. About 90 Wampanoag men, led by their leader Massasoit, joined the event, likely after hearing gunfire from the colonists' festivities and coming to ensure the peace agreement still held. They stayed, brought venison, took part in games and diplomacy, and shared food, but no pies and none of the black hats immortalized in storybooks. The deeper myth is the idea of perfect harmony. The meeting was cooperative but born of necessity. The Wampanoag had been ravaged by an epidemic and sought strategic alliances. The Pilgrims needed Indigenous knowledge to survive. The real "First Thanksgiving" was not a timeless moment of unity but a brief, complicated encounter between two nations navigating a precarious future.

Those colonial pressures helped shape Native choices in the French and Indian Wars, a series of conflicts from 1688 to 1763 in which France and Britain fought for control of North America. Native nations weren't passive observers. They aligned with whichever power posed the lesser threat to their homelands. Many sided with the French not out of affinity, but because French settlements tended to be smaller and more focused on trade than land seizure. Alliances shifted constantly, but Indigenous diplomacy was always rooted in sovereignty, survival, and the defense of territory. The war's end, which transferred vast French lands to Britain, set the stage for tensions that exploded in the American Revolution.

And here again, as Burns emphasizes, Native nations faced excruciating choices. The Revolution was a war for liberty for the colonists, but for Indigenous peoples it was a war over who, if anyone, would honor their borders. Many tribes sided with the British because of the 1763 Royal Proclamation, which restricted colonial expansion westward. The Mohawk, Seneca and others viewed the Crown as the lesser of two advancing threats. In the South, the Creek and Choctaw made similar calculations. Other nations, including the Oneida and Tuscarora, supported the Americans, influenced by missionary relationships, trade networks, or internal disputes. Some hoped that aid in the Revolution would win recognition of sovereignty in the new republic. Tragically, neither side kept its promises. Whether they supported the Crown or the colonists, Native nations faced broken treaties, land seizures, and relentless westward pressure in the war's aftermath. As Burns' documentary makes clear, Indigenous involvement in America's founding conflicts was not marginal, it was central. Their choices were diverse, strategic, and deeply human, shaped by the same hopes and fears we all carry: the desire to protect one's home, one's people, and one's future.