

# DRINKS WITH DEAD PEOPLE

## QUARANTINE EDITION

APRIL 9, 2020:  
[THANKSGIVING](#)

It's a week of holidays here in quarantined-history-land. Today: the history of the American Thanksgiving holiday. (Plus, 16th century turkey tamales.)

### THE STORY

Despite the ambiguous roots of the Thanksgiving holiday (the traditional Thanksgiving narrative is by now pretty well known to be a racist creation myth), its transformation into the modern exercise of gratitude, homecoming and community is both interesting and uniquely American. In the 19th century, there was an overall push towards holidays at home, in an effort to avoid general public drunken mayhem. Combine a handful of Puritan concepts (the idea of a day of thanksgiving; Thursday holidays to keep Sunday free for church) with a consolidation of traditional English fall feasts into one easy day, and you get a bunch of New Englanders very happy to stuff themselves silly at home. And stuff they did; an article in *Gastronomica* notes: "The writer Harriet Beecher Stowe remembered her childhood thanksgiving celebrations in Litchfield, Connecticut: the meal took a week to prepare, and it was planned so that everyone could attend church service in the morning. The elaborate dinner included turkey, chicken pies, plum puddings, and four types of pie for dessert."

The 19th century writer and editor [Sarah Josepha Hale](#) (writer of "Mary Had A Little Lamb") had the idea that an official Thanksgiving holiday could pull the nation together in its antebellum discord, going so far as to suggest that churches take up Thanksgiving Day collections to purchase, educate and repatriate slaves. Writing to Lincoln's secretary of State William Seward, she urged the President to declare a national holiday – which he did in 1863. (The Pilgrims' story was tacked on well later on.)

Read on [at the blog](#) for more detail and resources.

### DISCUSS:

Was Ben Franklin right about the turkey being a better choice for national bird than a bald eagle?

What version of the Thanksgiving story did you learn in school? How has your concept of the holiday changed over time?

Is a [gratitude practice](#) helping you while you're stuck at home more than usual these days?

Hi, I'm Betsy. Stuck at home? Let's learn history together, because the past helps us to understand that we are not alone. Weekday updates during #COVID19.

**Questions? Comments? Say hello.**

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### READ MORE:

Maya Salam, "[Everything You Learned About Thanksgiving is Wrong](#)," *New York Times*

"[Read the Original Pitch for Thanksgiving](#)," Atlas Obscura

William Sitwell, [16th century Turkey Tamales recipe](#), from *A History of Food in 100 Recipes*