Wampanoag Agriculture at the Time of the First Thanksgiving

Published 12 October 2026, with Michael D. Wise.

This episode is tangentially about the First Thanksgiving, suitably published on Thanksgiving Day — in Canada. As my guest, professor Michael Wise, of the University of North Texas put it, "It makes sense, you know. We're talking 17th century. There's no such thing as US or Canada."

I wanted to talk to Mike Wise specifically about the Wampanoag people of the American Northeast. They were the people who, in the 1620s, taught the pilgrims how to grow corn, beans and squash and enabled them to survive their first few winters. The popular myth has them as the guests of the pilgrims at the first thanksgiving in 1621. But just about everything in that myth is wrong, starting with the idea that the indigenous people didn't really do agriculture. Of course they did. But it was fundamentally different from the farming the colonists were familiar with. So how did the English colonists see Wampanoag agriculture?

Mike Wise: This is a good question that gets right to the core of, I think, what it is that historians have and haven't really analysed, thinking through Thanksgiving, thinking through the history of agriculture in general and these sort of differences. The place where I have kind of arrived is thinking about agriculture not so much as an object that we can describe, but as a way of seeing different types of activities that relate to the production and distribution of food. And so I think this is a powerful way of kind of being a sympathetic historical observer, both to native people and to settler colonists in the sense that what constitutes agriculture for any given community refers to much more than the simple practices of growing corn, for instance, and much more. It encompasses an entire way of seeing the world and seeing the landscape.

What I mean by seeing is, it makes certain things visible and certain things invisible. So for the pilgrims, not only was there sort of a

subconscious effort not to see native agriculture in order to represent the new world as an unpeopled space ready for settlement. But also, I think, just the kind of European and particularly the English framework for thinking about what constitutes agriculture, made it also impossible to fit native practices into that particular category of agricultural production.

So one of the major differences most native agricultural practices, just in general across New England, but across the rest of what ends up becoming the United States, agriculture was marked by by interplanting. So not planting the same crop in a kind of monocrop field, which has become a legacy of this sort of European agricultural tradition. Interplanting was a major component and also fallowing of fields. And this is really a crucial point, because this is central to this European idea that land was being underutilised or not used by the Wampanoags and others. Sort of common shorthand to think about the interplanting, this concept of the Three Sisters: corn, beans and squash. And it was a widely planted trio of crops across the Americas. The corn provided a trellis for beans, the beans fixed nitrogen back into the soil (and corn is a heavy nitrogen feeding crop) and then squash would vine out as like a living mulch. And so this interplanting is often sort of touted as like a kind of — like a it's a myth in and of itself — that this three sisters agriculture is a sustainable way to maintain soil productivity and fertilisation, etc.

Basically in New England, after seven years of planting these three sisters plots, usually along alluvial river plains, so, these would be fields that would periodically flood rather than planting up on the uplands up high in the European model would have been pasture land or something like that. Seven years, you'd have to leave it fallow in order to allow the minerals and other sort of, all of the nutrients to replenish. And of course, Wampanoags didn't necessarily see it the same way that we would see it with 21st century sciences of agronomy and petrology, et cetera, but over generations of successful agricultural production in southern New England they had developed a system of fallowing lands in which they would also move their village. There would be these periodic, typically around every seven years, there would be a relocation. And then, this would be sort of generationally go back and forth.

And so when the pilgrims arrived at Plymouth Rock, they literally found themselves on one of these fallowed fields and empty villages

and interpreted it as some kind of divine providence or something, that God had removed the native inhabitants and bequeathed upon them their houses and their fields. But of course, this was still Patuxent, was very much still part of the Wampanoag community, of Wampanoag possession. It was simply being temporarily fallowed.

Jeremy: If the pilgrims thought of these fallow lands that they landed upon as somehow having been emptied, was that also that they didn't quite grasp the property ownership of the local people? Is there a contrast there between owning a farm and living in an ecosystem?

Mike: Yes. I think it's important to keep in mind that in the 16th, early 17th century, the English themselves were in the middle of a property revolution. We are often sort of trained, I think, to think of this moment as the tail end of the so-called enclosure movement, the transfer basically of land ownership into a form of fee title where the ownership in the British Isles of estates transfers from some kind of granting via feudal obligations to lesser lords, into a legal system that's codified by titular ownership of the land itself, meaning that a whole set of new property rights become embedded into that title. Property rights that include the possibility for the first time of removing peasants from your estate.

This revolution, I really don't think that it can be understated. This across the Anglophone world today is basically how English common law has structured property ownership and property relations, through these discrete titles, claims of ownership that are heritable, that can be bought and sold. This didn't exist yet for the pilgrims. In fact, the pilgrims initially had decided that they were going to own their colony in common. This didn't last very long. It lasted just a few years before they decided to create their own private property regime. But this contrasts in general to the sort of cadastral system of the Wampanoags and others, it's often, referred to in the anthropological literature with the term usufruct.

Jeremy: Which is something to do with ... I've seen the word in in the context of loans and having the ability to use something.

Mike: Correct. Yes. And that's actually a good point. I'm not sure where the sort of Latin roots or Germanic root of use, but you think of like usury as a cardinal sin or something. So usufruct basically, it's just, it's a concept referring to a type of concept of ownership based on use. In other words, a particular site comes into possession while

one is using it. And then once one is no longer using it, the site is no longer within one's possession. So this is another kind of complicated concept. It again ... This is a 20th century concept from Western anthropology that's often used as a way of analysing and understanding the concept of property and possession and ownership within not just a Native American context, but across comparative anthropology of all other sorts of notions about ownership. This is very difficult thing for, I think, us in the 21st century, steeped in the world of private property, to actually think outside of these sort of academic categories of what it is that Wampanoags in 1620 would have thought about Patuxet, this fallow village. They weren't using it at the moment. It was fallow. And yet, the usufruct concept doesn't fully give credit, I think, to the sense that, yes, the Wampanoag still saw this as a Wampanoag possession.

Jeremy: Yeah. I could kind of make a case that they were using it by allowing it to regain its fertility.

I've just done an episode about the Little Ice Age and how that blocked tomatoes from really getting a foothold in England. To what extent was the Pilgrim Fathers', quote failure unquote, more to do with the climate than with their own inexpertise?

Mike: It's hard to disentangle. Little Ice Age or no Little Ice Age, the climatic differences between southern New England and England proper are vast, as are the sort of soils. The, the chief problem basically that the pilgrims faced was that they tried to grow barley and wheat and oats, as you would in the British Isles in the summer in southern New England, where it's hotter, drier — and wetter — and sort of less consistent conditions.

As a new world crop corn had a lot going for it in New England, for instance. And it's not really until later on in the 17th century that English agriculturalists start experimenting with some other crops, some crops that I think we typically associate more with southern and Eastern Europe, like rye, for instance. These are crops that, for a variety of reasons, are much easier to grow in the American northeast than at least historical varieties of wheat and barley that would have been grown across all of England. I think one of my favourite examples of this actually, you think about the different whiskey traditions between, for instance, Scotland and all of the Scotch Irish bourbon traditions that emerge in the United States

later. You know, Canadian whiskeys are rye, American whiskeys are corn, and it's the old country whiskies that are barley. And this, I think, is just a really good illustration of the fact that climate does play a significant role in terms of global distributions of grain.

Jeremy: I'm sure you've read the Dawn of Everything, David Graeber and David Wengrow, a book about anthropologies and things. I was intrigued, not an expert, by the idea that many of the indigenous people of North America would sometimes be agriculturalists, and sometimes they would not be agriculturalists, and that they were kind of flexible about their organisation, their social organisation, in ways that enabled them to do one or the other and switch between the two. Is is that something you find among the Wampanoags?

Mike: Yeah, I think so. I mean, all sort of communities to a large extent have this capacity, this flexibility, I think. Native communities are no different. There are limitations to what we can know using the sort of methods of settler colonial social science to look back into the past and identify these patterns. But certainly there was a complicated history of food provisioning among the Wampanoag, and I think a starting point that's often common is thinking about these communities and their provisioning in relation to their local ecologies and their local environments.

In the case of Southern New England, not only is there agricultural land available, but there are mixed hardwood forests interspersed with meadows. This is a climatic zone where, over a relatively short distance, maybe several hundred miles, half a dozen different ecological zones are covered, for instance, as you go up the Connecticut River Valley into what's now present day New Hampshire or Vermont. And so, not only were there all kinds of different activities involving fisheries, hunting and agricultural, what we think of as more conventional agricultural activities. But then, a huge trade network spanning the coastal regions into the, what I think of as the colder interior. We have lots of historical documentation, both on the sort of native oral tradition side and then also on what you might think of as the conventional settler colonial archival side, documenting this trade. Basically, above present day Dartmouth, New Hampshire, you can't grow corn very easily because there aren't enough frost free days. And so Wampanoags would trade corn with their northern neighbours, usually in exchange for different types of

dried and preserved meats that have been hunted from the northern forests.

Jeremy: That's great, because I really want to talk about corn in a little more detail. You mentioned the 100 days cut off and even southern Wampanoag country, if you like, sort of southern Massachusetts down that way, is not ... I mean, it has 100 days, but, but ... How did the Wampanoag cope with the fact that actually, you know, there could be a season in which you didn't get your 100 days of frost free growing? How did they adapt corn as it came up from Mesoamerica.

Mike: Yeah, this is one of my favourite questions. I mean, it seems like there's a straightforward answer. And yet there are so many mysteries with corn and its migration northward. What we do know, I mean, corn certainly was present in Wampanoag agriculture by probably the eighth or ninth century of the common era. So there, by the time the pilgrims arrive, it had been, I don't know, perhaps even a thousand years of corn cultivation in southern New England. Corn is not just corn. I mean, as we know, corn is one of the more genetically prolific vegetables that emerged as a domesticated crop, as you mentioned, in Mesoamerica in ancient times. And then across the sort of historical span was adapted into particular landrace varieties by native people spreading northward. And this original tropical crop probably required a 250 day growing season. And it was adapted across North America and to a wide variety of different types of corn, basically, or cultivars, some of which required as low as 60 days from germination to a harvestable crop.

Jeremy: And this was back then, there were maybe 60 day corns? We don't know.

Mike: Yeah. We do know. They, not necessarily ... I don't know that the Wampanoags had a 60 day corn. I wouldn't be surprised. But we do know in southern Arizona, O'odham corns, they had 60 day corns. I mean, these were corns that would basically be planted in the late summer, right before the monsoon in the southwestern deserts. And the O'odhams for many years through a combination of using irrigation channels to kind of make that water last, would be able to grow corn within 60 days before the winter.

Jeremy: Let's go back to the northeast. How did the Wampanoag, how did the Wampanoag grow their corn and how did they select their corn?

Mike: Yeah, this is really fascinating. The selection process as far as we know, really focused on colour. So there were different colours of corn, and each colour of corn would have a different culinary use or a different agronomic use. All right. And so the way that seeds would be selected, the seeds would be selected based on other types of characteristics. There would be an early corn. There would be a later corn, there would be a corn that would be harvested fresh as green corn or sweet corn. There would be corns that were raised for long term storage. And of course there would be seed corns.

Now, anyone who's tried to grow corn before, I mean, there are certain biological idiosyncrasies to the plant that are worth mentioning in a historical context. The first is that corn is a genetically prolific. It hybridises very easily and quickly, which both means that it is relatively easy to experiment with interbreeding of corn varieties. I mean, we know this in the modern ... Modern corn, for instance, is, even even before the manipulation of corn genetics with DNA modifications, the industry of hybridised corn as it emerged in the United States in the early 20th century is just like sort of maybe one of the most important histories of modern agriculture, period.

But this genetic ... One of the reasons for the profligacy of these varieties is because corn will hybridise very easily. It pollinates through the wind, and corn pollen can carry for miles under the right conditions. Corn pollination also is not very efficient in the sense that if you've ever tried to grow, like, just a handful of corn plants, you're not going to get sufficient pollination. You have to plant corn in relatively large blocks because these big clouds of pollen that fall on the corn silks, what we think of as the corn silks, each one of those little silks, when you husk an ear of corn, it's connected to one of the kernels, connected to one of the seeds. And the only way that that seed will be pollinated and actually turn into a kernel, is if the pollen hits that corn silk. That's the literal physical mechanics of corn pollination. So if you buy corn, sweet corn, corn on the cob and you see it's missing a bunch of kernels, I think oftentimes people think there's like a corn worm or something like that got in there and ate it, but probably it was just insufficient pollination. So the corn wasn't fully filled out. Okay. So how do you do this, if you're trying to

separate all of these different varieties of corn and you've got these massive clouds of pollination?

This is where colour was vital. Wampanoags saved seeds separately of these different colours. These different varieties would be colour coded. They would be planted in a staggered manner. So you would plant red, let's say, during the first week after the last frost. A month later, you would plant yellow. A month after that you would plant the mixed variety. And so the idea was that these corns would only be going into flower when that particular colour block was pollinating. And then because these, over generations okay?, these corns have been selected by colour, the seed stock for the next year could be easily isolated visually by looking at the colour of the of the ear. So it would be really easy to tell if there was some unintended hybrid that had snuck through these precautions.

The best way of selecting seed corn because of this pollination pattern, is to pick the ears that are lowest, because generally those lowest ears are the first ones to pollinate. So you can ensure better pollination in these colour blocks if you pick those early ears versus the later ears where there might be more overlap with whatever the next variety is that's starting to come into flower.

Jeremy: Did the Wampanoag know about nixtamalization? Did they know about grinding the corn so as to make more vitamin B12 available?

Mike: Yeah, that's a good question. I don't think that they knew of nixtamalization the same way, for instance, that native communities in the southwest did. But I wouldn't be surprised at all if there was some utilisation of wood ash, for instance, to help with this process with particular dishes.

Jeremy: Particular dishes. Do we do we know the kinds of ways in which the Wampanoag prepared their corn? You mentioned fresh sweet corn, dried corn for the winter. But do we know how they were cooking it?

Mike: Yeah, sort of. One of the most significant dishes, I think, that folks don't always think of would be kind of like a corn cracker that was produced by grinding cornmeal and then drying this into some kind of a cake sort of that could be ... This is basically a road food. I mean, today we can stop on a road trip at a convenience store and

get our Fritos or something like that. This is kind of like 17th century Fritos, these corn cakes.

Corn is a really malleable ingredient. It can be served in any which way from fresh into dried. And I mean, I think some of the other classic dishes would be sort of like a sagamité, what we think of as sort of like a stew or ???, what the pilgrims might have called a pottage. It would be sort of a big container kept on a boil that would have dried corn and squash, beans and whatever else might be available, too.

Jeremy: So if you were going to really recreate a Thanksgiving dinner, assuming one even took place, what would be on the table?

Mike: Well, as we know, there wouldn't be turkeys. But there would be fish, there would be plenty of corn, plenty of beans. There would be squash. There may or may not be wild game, depending on the availability. I think one of the challenges for the pilgrims is that they weren't very good hunters in the sense ... I mean, this is true kind of across the Atlantic seaboard, the English colonies, most of the colonists weren't trained in hunting traditions. They weren't ,,, There were expectations of providing militia service and things like that, so there was kind of rudimentary training in firearms, but I mean, 17th century, a matchlock, or flintlock even, are not very effective tools for amateurs to go out shooting birds and deer. So I think, you know, the Thanksgiving would probably look a lot more plant and seafood based, far more so than the typical American table in 2026.

Transcripts are possible thanks to the generosity of Eat This Podcast supporters. If you find the transcript useful, please consider joining them.