

The Slightly Gobbled History of the Turkey

By Dennis Knight

We blame Europe's Christopher Columbus for believing he was in the East Indies when he landed on the Eastern seaboard islands of the Americas in 1492, and his successors for lumping together our many nations of indigenous people, and calling them Indians.

How the turkey got its name may not have been quite as offensive, but it happened by mistake in a similar way. An expedition of Spanish Conquistadors to Mexico in 1523 encountered the meleagris gallopovo, native only to North America, brought it back to the Eastern Mediterranean. In the decade beginning 1550, British traders acquired live stocks of the fowl, now domesticated, believing it was a species native to the country of Turkey. In England the name "Turkey bird" contracted to turkey and it landed in the dictionary with a real turkey of an etymology.

And if that isn't enough irony for you, in Turkey, the bird is called a hindi, which derived via Middle French but means Indian. Has anything ever been more bassackward? We call our own bird the turkey because the English didn't know its origin; in Turkey they call it Indian because Columbus had gone astray halfway around the globe.

The fatted turkey soon competed with the fatted goose as a mainstay for Christmas dinners throughout Europe and in the New World, which seems to have inherited the European predilection for reaching errant conclusions that never get corrected.

Although the earliest known Thanksgiving celebration in our country was in Jamestown, Virginia in 1607, generations of schoolchildren have been taught that the first Thanksgiving was held at Plymouth, Massachusetts in 1621. An early painting of that event, which children still act out today in school pageants wearing the costumes portrayed, depicts Pilgrims in the hats of Puritans, which they weren't, and portrays their friends, the Wampanoag people, in headdresses of tribes of the Great Plains, a thousand miles distant.

According to a *New Yorker* article in 1962, it's a myth that Ben Franklin espoused the turkey as our national bird, but he did pen a letter to his daughter that, "For my own part I wish the Bald Eagle had not been chosen the Representative of our Country. He is a Bird of bad moral Character." He explains his point in too many words for this essay, but concludes by saying the turkey is the more respectable of the birds, and though a "little vain and silly, a bird of courage."

Sometime in the past century, the word turkey in a Broadway review came to mean a bad show and I sometimes use it that way myself (see second paragraph.) When or how it became a putdown I don't know, but I'm sure turkey in its negative form must exclude the wild turkey we admire. My guess is that, down on the farm, all the while animal scientists have been developing domesticated turkeys with bigger, fatter, juicier breasts, they've been shrinking their brains. Turkeys.