

William Bradford & Edward Winslow: The “First Thanksgiving” at Plymouth (1621)

Colonial New England would eventually be dominated by the Puritans, who followed the teachings of French Protestant reformer John Calvin. The Puritans sought to “purify” the Anglican Church of its remaining Roman Catholic traditions. The Anglican Church was the official Church of England, founded when King Henry VIII broke with the Roman Catholic Church in the 1530s.

The Puritans believed in predestination; that is, God foreordains, before one’s birth, whether a person will ascend into heaven upon death. Such thought therefore rendered earthly conduct largely ineffective with regard to determining the question of heavenly salvation. However, there was still ample room within the Puritan faith for wholesome behavior—committing good deeds was interpreted as a sign that an individual was among the fortunate. Puritan logic dictated that since society’s chief purpose was to do the will of God, there could be no legitimate separation between church and state.

The Pilgrims were Separatists, a radical splinter group of the Puritans. Whereas the Puritans worked from within the Anglican Church to eradicate all traces of Roman Catholicism, the Pilgrims held the more extreme position that the Anglican Church was simply too corrupt to be sufficiently cleansed. Hence, the Pilgrims sought complete autonomy for their congregations.

The Pilgrims were looked upon in their time much the same way extremist cults are viewed today. British authorities banished the Pilgrims outright, forcing them to go underground or into exile. After seeking refuge in Holland for a decade, the Pilgrims grew somewhat disenchanted with their Dutch environment, and began to look elsewhere for settlement. They turned their eyes toward the New World, and soon secured a charter through the Virginia Company, which had founded Jamestown several years prior.

The Pilgrims returned to England just long enough to arrange passage to the New World. In September of 1620, they boarded two ships, *Speedwell* and *Mayflower*, at Plymouth Harbor and headed across the Atlantic Ocean. Less than half of the 100-plus passengers were actually Pilgrims—the larger contingent was composed of Anglican loyalists (referred to as “Strangers” by their Pilgrim shipmates). Almost immediately, the *Speedwell* proved unseaworthy and was forced to turn back, whereupon its passengers were taken aboard the *Mayflower*. After two months at sea, the Pilgrims and their congenial travel partners hit New World shore.

Plymouth’s first winter was extremely harsh; nearly half of its inhabitants perished. No doubt aid from the neighboring Indians, especially one named Squanto, who spoke English (learned from contacts with earlier explorers to the area), helped the colony survive. The Pilgrims believed Squanto to be “a special instrument sent of God.” Another English-speaking Indian, Samoset, also provided invaluable assistance to the struggling settlers. The following autumn—the precise month is unclear—the grateful settlers presented a feast, lasting several days, for their many Indian friends. Tradition calls this the first Thanksgiving. Two primary sources exist for the events of autumn 1621 in Plymouth—*Of Plimoth Plantation*, by William Bradford and *Mourt’s Relation*, by Edward Winslow.

Much of today’s knowledge of the Pilgrims is drawn from the writings of Bradford and Winslow, though both are somewhat propagandist in places. The Pilgrims selected Bradford as their first governor, a position he would occupy on-and-off for the next 33 years. (Technically, he was the colony’s second governor. John Carver was initially given the post, but he died soon thereafter.) Bradford journaled about the Pilgrims’ first three decades on American soil in *Of Plimoth Plantation*. Edward Winslow succeeded Bradford as governor three times, serving intermittently from 1633 through 1645. Winslow was also one of the leading Pilgrim ambassadors to nearby Indian tribes. He wrote several historical accounts of the Plymouth colony. The first, parts of it written jointly with Bradford, is generally known as *Mourt’s Relation*, owing to its preface signed by “G. Mourt.”

William Bradford in *Of Plimoth Plantation*:

“They begane now to gather in ye small harvest they had, and to fitte up their houses and dwellings against winter, being all well recovered in health & strenght, and had all things in good plenty; fFor as some were thus employed in affairs abroad, others were excersised in fishing, aboute codd, & bass, & other fish, of which yey tooke good store, of which every family had their portion. All ye somer ther was no want. And now begane to come in store of foule, as winter approached, of which this place did abound when they came first (but afterward decreased by degrees). And besids water foule, ther was great store of wild Turkie, of which they tooke many, besids venison, &c. Besids, they had about a peck a meale a weeke to a person, or now since harvest, Indean corn to yt proportion. Which made many afterwards write so largely of their plenty hear to their freinds in England, which were not fained, but true reports.”

Current version:

“They began now to gather in the small harvest they had, and to fit up their houses and dwellings against winter, being all well recovered in health and strength and had all things in good plenty. For as some were thus employed in affairs abroad, others were exercised in fishing, about cod and bass and other fish, of which they took good store, of which every family had their portion. All the summer there was no want; and now began to come in store of fowl, as winter approached, of which this place did abound when they came first (but afterward decreased by degrees). And besides waterfowl there was great store of wild turkeys, of which they took many, besides venison, etc. Besides, they had about a peck of meal a week to a person, or now since harvest, Indian corn to that proportion. Which made many afterwards write so largely of their plenty here to their friends in England, which were not feigned but true reports.”



Edward Winslow in *Mourt's Relation*:

“Our harvest being gotten in, our governour sent foure men on fowling, that so we might after a speciall manner rejoyce together, after we had gathered the fruits of our labours ; they foure in one day killed as much fowle, as with a little helpe beside, served the Company almost a weeke, at which time amongst other Recreations, we exercised our Armes, many of the Indians coming amongst us, and amongst the rest their greatest king Massasoit, with some ninetie men, whom for three dayes we entertained and feasted, and they went out and killed five Deere, which they brought to the Plantation and bestowed on our Governour, and upon the Captaine and others. And although it be not always so plentifull, as it was at this time with us, yet by the goodness of God, we are so farre from want, that we often wish you partakers of our plentie.”

Current version:

“Our harvest being gotten in, our governor sent four men on fowling, that so we might after a special manner rejoice together, after we had gathered the fruits of our labors; they four in one day killed as much fowl, as with a little help beside, served the Company almost a week, at which time amongst other Recreations, we exercised our Arms, many of the Indians coming amongst us, and amongst the rest their greatest king Massasoit, with some ninety men, whom for three days we entertained and feasted, and they went out and killed five Deer, which they brought to the Plantation and bestowed on our Governor, and upon the Captain and others. And although it be not always so plentiful, as it was at this time with us, yet by the goodness of God, we are so far from want, that we often wish you partakers of our plenty.”