

The First Thanksgiving

In early autumn of 1621, the 53 surviving Pilgrims celebrated their successful harvest, as was the English custom. During this time, "many of the Indians coming... amongst the rest their great king Massasoit, with some ninety men."

That 1621 celebration is remembered as the "First Thanksgiving in Plymouth." There are two (and only two) primary source descriptions of the events of the fall of 1621. In Mourt's Relation, Edward Winslow writes:

"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."

In Of Plymouth Plantation, William Bradford writes:

"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."

The Pilgrims did not call this harvest festival a "Thanksgiving," although they did give thanks to God. To them, a Day of Thanksgiving was purely religious. The first recorded religious Day of Thanksgiving was held in 1623 in response to a providential rainfall.