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Historical Account of Thanksgiving

The Pilgrims' Thanksgiving

The Pilgrims are well known today for their association with the [first Thanksgiving festival](#). The [Pilgrims](#) were Separatists – a set



of Protestants who felt that they would be unable to reform the Church of England and therefore needed to separate and form their own church. Following [persecution](#) from the Church of England, they went to [Holland](#) and then eventually to America. (The [Puritans](#) were those who believed they could reform the Church of England. It turned out that they were wrong, and following severe persecution, some [20,000](#) followed the Pilgrims to America.)



The Pilgrims had [obtained](#) a land grant for Virginia and set sail in the Mayflower on September 6, 1620. But after a rough ocean crossing, they [landed](#) some 200

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miles north of Virginia in what became known as Massachusetts. On November 11, 1620, they finally dropped anchor and [came ashore](#).

The harsh New England winter was already well underway. Having no homes or shelter of any kind when they landed, before spring arrived, half of the [100 settlers](#) had died. But that first year also brought unexpected blessings as some of [the Indians](#) in the area who had learned English were willing to [help](#) the Pilgrims by showing them many things they needed to survive, including how to plant Indian crops such as corn, and how to hunt and fish in that area.

The Pilgrims [first harvest](#) was bountiful – enough to fill their needs and help them through the coming winter. So even though it had been a harsh year, they still had reason to celebrate. The governor of Plymouth Colony therefore called a three-day festival, inviting the ninety Indians to join the 50 Pilgrims. [This feast](#), which included times of thanks to God as well as athletic competitions and food and fellowship, is commonly celebrated as the first Thanksgiving festival in America. [Edward Winslow](#), an early governor of Plymouth, wrote [this account](#):

[O]ur 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 fruit of our labors. They four in one day killed as much 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 among 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.



As we celebrate Thanksgiving this year, let's remember the history of this holiday and the hard work of these early pious Christians as we, too, take time to thank God for our blessings. From all of us at WallBuilders, Happy Thanksgiving!

(If you're interested in more information on historic American Thanksgiving across the centuries, WallBuilders has a collection of Thanksgiving [proclamations](#) from various state governors & presidents as well as a collection of [historical sermons](#) on the Pilgrims and Thanksgiving celebrations.)



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