



Written by [Steve Byas](#) on November 21, 2016

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The Meaning of Thanksgiving

On the fourth Thursday of each November, millions of Americans gather around the dinner table to eat turkey and dressing, and stuff themselves with all kinds of foods, in the great American holiday known as Thanksgiving. The story of the holiday's origins reveals much of what made this country at its founding.

While the first shots of the American Revolution are said to have been fired in 1775, John Adams remarked that the revolution was already "complete" in the minds of the colonists. He meant that the embattled farmers stood on the village green at Lexington and at Concord's Old North Bridge, not to change their way of life, but to preserve it.

The Thanksgiving celebration is an important part of that revolution, in which a new way of life developed on the shores of English America.

Canada also celebrates Thanksgiving, and it was Spanish Catholics who held the first Thanksgiving in the New World, in Florida at St. Augustine a generation earlier. But America's holiday is deeply rooted in the fundamental concepts that created the American nation, and its way of life.

England separated from the Roman Catholic Church in the early 1500s, largely because of King Henry VIII's desire for a divorce the pope would not grant. After his death, the country remained Protestant (except for the five years his Catholic daughter, Mary, held the throne). English monarchs tolerated different religious doctrines, but they insisted they all be observed within the Church of England, which they could control.

After the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588, the English took the opportunity to plant colonies on the eastern coast of North America, with the first permanent settlement at Jamestown in Virginia in 1607. These Virginia settlers held Thanksgiving feasts to thank God for the harvest, even making it an official celebration in 1619. But because the earliest American history books were written by New Englanders from places such as Harvard, it was the celebration in the Plymouth Colony (later absorbed by Massachusetts in 1691) that is cited as "the first Thanksgiving."

One group of English Christians, the Separatists, wanted to rule themselves in independent congregations. Queen Elizabeth and her successor, King James I, could not imagine the existence of any churches not under their control. This led some Separatists to move to the Netherlands, where their Calvinistic Reformed theology was preached and practiced. The small group, under the leadership of William Brewster and John Robinson, settled in Leyden.

After a decade, they were ready to move again, no doubt contributing greatly to their name of Pilgrims. It distressed them that their children were growing up as Dutch kids, even speaking Dutch rather than English. They secured permission from King James to obtain a land patent from the London Virginia Company to settle at the mouth of the Hudson River.

The Pilgrims were concerned about their journey, and what they might encounter in the New World. They had heard horror stories of the indigenous peoples — the Indians — whom they had heard were a "savage people," who not only killed but tortured those they did not like, even "broiling" some on the coals.

Despite their concerns, they decided they would put their faith in God, and 102 Pilgrims (plus crew) set



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off across the treacherous Atlantic Ocean. They reached Cape Cod in November, but after attempting to sail south to the mouth of the Hudson, they ran into trouble in the shallow area of shoals around Nantucket Island. With winter coming on, and provisions low, they returned to Cape Cod.

By December 6, William Bradford, who would soon become governor, recalled, "The weather was very cold and it froze so hard as the spray of the sea lighting on their coats, as if they had been glazed." Then, on December 8, the rudder broke, followed by the mast breaking in three pieces, falling overboard into the sea.

Many Pilgrims didn't last the winter. Bradford's own 23-year-old wife was among those who died. Eight died in January, 17 in February. Thirteen more perished in March. By March fewer than 60 were still alive, nursed by six or seven healthy persons.

A Native American named Squanto, who spoke fluent English (because he had spent five years in England as a slave, before returning to America), taught them to raise corn, by using fish for fertilizer.

In 1621, a mere 51 Pilgrims had survived to celebrate the harvest we now know as "The First Thanksgiving." They invited a neighboring Indian chief, and 90 Indians as guests, who brought five deer to the feast, adding to the Pilgrims' own bounty.

They thanked God for their survival, and began building a new way of life, knowing that their liberties came from the same God who had brought them across the seas.

Happy Thanksgiving.



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