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### The Mayflower Pilgrims and the History of the American Thanksgiving Holiday

The Mayflower Pilgrims endeavored for religious freedom offered in the New World. Boarding the Mayflower, a small cargo ship, these brave men, women, and children embarked on a journey leaving all familiar life where they would encounter numerous hardships: from adversities on the ship itself, to the problems of landing in a new, uncharted world, without food or shelter. The Mayflower Pilgrims' will and determination brought them success to celebrate, which became the source of the American Thanksgiving holiday in years to come.

The Pilgrims sought religious freedom when they traveled to America in September of 1620. During the reign of King James I, a group of Separatists moved to Amsterdam, where they could worship freely, and then soon after made their home in Leiden, Holland for ten years (Pilgrim History). Yet, because they were foreigners, they could not join the Dutch craft guilds and could only work in unskilled and poorly paid jobs (Brinkley 40). Wanting their English heritage to remain intact, while still being ostracized for their religious beliefs, they decided to cross the Atlantic to the New World.

On November 11<sup>th</sup>, 1620, the 104<sup>\*\*</sup> men signed the Mayflower Compact, which, for over seventy years, would become the official Constitution of Plymouth Colony. Their agreement "to be governed by themselves according to the will of the majority" (Cline) was the first document of American Democracy as known today. They signed this document from the ship, in the harbor of Cape Cod. They landed in Plymouth on December 21<sup>st</sup>.

To make matters worse, winter brought cold weather and sickness. The Pilgrims remained living on their ships while, when the weather allowed, they fell and carried timber for building material. The men would build the common house together, to store supplies, and each

\* 41 men signed the Mayflower Compact.

man would build his own house (Cline). But malnutrition, disease, and exposure would take the lives of half the colonists during the months of that first winter (Brinkley 41).

Samoset and Squanto, who spoke English, gave the pilgrims a new chance in March. They taught them about poisonous and medicinal plants, how to use maple trees for sap, and how to grow corn, using fish as fertilizer (Olsen 5). They also traded skins. Chief Massasoit and the first governor of the Plymouth Colony, John Carver, met, and they agreed on a peace treaty between the Pilgrims and the Wampanoag tribe, and a friendship remained for over fifty years (Cline).

The Pilgrim's first harvest in 1621, with the help of their friends, was successful. William Bradford, the current governor, decided they would share in a harvest feast (Olsen 5). To the Pilgrim Puritans, "a true 'thanksgiving' was a day of prayer and pious humiliation, thanking God for His special Providence" (Thanksgiving History). The Pilgrims had much to be thankful for and, "they were partly thanking their Indian neighbors for the corn and wild meat they had shared. But they were also giving thanks for their own crops and animals, on which not just their survival but their sense of safety and familiarity depended" (Brinkley 43).

Turkey remains today, but for the Pilgrims, it was only a part of their Thanksgiving feast. Other sustenance included deer meat, wild fowl, squash, pumpkin, berries, and nuts (Olsen 20). They may have used herbs or onions as stuffing, and for the English, oats (Partakers of our Plenty). The staple Indian corn grown by the Wampanoag became vital for the Pilgrims, who modified their own porridge, pancakes, breads, and other items for corn. The festival, assumed to have been during mid-October, lasted three days. They played games, ran races, and played drums. The Indians and the Pilgrims presented their bow and arrow and musket skills, respectively (Olsen 20).

In consideration of the countless hardships faced by the brave Pilgrims, they found reasons to be thankful. Affairs in Plymouth improved with the successful harvest. They had enough food to survive the winter and they had grown healthy relations with the natives. Despite the hard life they had sailed to, their will and determination to live where they could practice their own religion freely had prevailed. Thanksgiving would become a national holiday in the 1850's. The first Thanksgiving allows us in the present day to look back at history, and realize, when we celebrate thanksgiving, and when we tell each other what we are thankful for, how incredibly fortunate we really are, to have been born in the land of the free, without having to demonstrate our bravery in the making of a new colony.

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