

The First Thanksgiving **by Dr. Paul Jehle, Plymouth Rock Foundation**

When the Pilgrims and Native Americans had their three day Feast, probably in October of 1621, there were approximately 140 people, yet only four adult Pilgrim women were still alive after the first winter to host the meal! Over 90 men, with Massasoit, chief of the Womponoags, joined the feast and brought much of the food. It was a Thanksgiving meal that included fowl, deer, sea bass, wild turkeys and maybe even popcorn!

Of course, Plymouth is not the first place, nor are the Pilgrims the first people, who gave thanks on these shores. St. Augustine claims it fifty years before the Pilgrims, and Berkeley Hundred plantation says it had a Thanksgiving day two years before the Pilgrims arrived. Of course, the Wompanoags themselves gave thanks to the Great Spirit for hundreds of years before the Pilgrims or any European ever arrived.

What makes Thanksgiving in Plymouth unique, however, were its roots in English history and that it was held in harmony with the natives. Prayers of thanksgiving were offered for a good harvest. The Pilgrim Thanksgiving of 1621 was patterned after the harvest festival in England. It was a time of giving thanks to God, with the Native Americans, and included a feast for three days along with athletic games and contests. We are truly the first place where Thanksgiving was held with these characteristics. Edward Winslow's description is as follows.

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 fruit 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 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."

