

The King's Highway

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Make a joyful noise unto the Lord, all ye lands. Serve the Lord with gladness: come before his presence with singing. Know ye that the Lord he is God: it is he that hath made us, and not we ourselves; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture. Enter into his gates with thanksgiving, and into his courts with praise: be thankful unto him, and bless his name. For the Lord is good; his mercy is everlasting; and his truth endureth to all generations.

—Psalms 100

The First Thanksgiving

The water was too shallow to land the boat. But the harbor was well sheltered, and it looked like the kind of landing place they were seeking.

"Bring her alongside that rock!" said Captain Miles Standish.

The tiny boat, its mast split in three places, turned its side to the grey December sea and drifted up against the great boulder. The intrepid Standish stepped over the gunwale and planted his foot on the New England granite.

The boulder was —Plymouth Rock.

For the Pilgrims, it was "the end of the beginning." Behind lay persecution, exile—and the momentous decision to seek religious freedom in the uncharted New World. Ahead lay hardship, death—and immortality.

It was four days before Christmas when Standish and his small group of men went ashore at Plymouth. They returned to the Mayflower, anchored off Provincetown, with the good news that a site for the new settlement had been found.

On December 26th Mayflower, braving wintry winds, made a successful passage into Plymouth Harbor.

The Mayflower had set out for America on September 16, 1620, with 102 passengers. On November 19, land was sighted. A few days later the Pilgrims met in the cabin of the ship and drew up the famous "Mayflower Compact," establishing themselves as a civic body under a government of law. It is one of the great documents in mankind's search for freedom.

The Pilgrims' first winter is a tragic—and precious—page in American history. In *The Story of the Pilgrims*, published in the John Hancock Mutual Life Insurance Company's popular historical booklet series, the group's sufferings are described. "Before the winter was over, half the entire band had perished of disease, hunger, and exposure."

The dead were buried on nearby Cole's Hill, and grain was sown over the burial plot to conceal from the Indians how many of the band had died. It was feared that this knowledge might embolden the Indians to make an attack.

Early in March the incredibly cold winter finally began to recede. On March 26 another hopeful event took place when Samoset, grand sachem of the Monhegan Indians, entered the village exclaiming "Welcome!" Through him the Puritans became acquainted with Squanto, and these two Indians played an important role in the history of the Colony.

They told the Pilgrims to plant Indian corn "when the oak-leaves are as big as mouse-ears," and to catch fish to fertilize the soil. Thus the seeds were shown for the first Thanksgiving harvest.

Twenty-one men and "six large boys"—the entire surviving able-bodied male working force of the colony—did the planting. They had no horses or other domestic animals. With heavy hoes they broke the earth, and planted 20 acres of corn. Then they sowed six more acres with wheat, rye, barley and peas.

It was a warm and bright summer, and the crops grew and thrived.

When autumn arrived, the three log warehouses were filled with provisions. By this time Plymouth Colony also boasted seven dwellings and a combined church and town meeting hall.

Not only did the Pilgrims enjoy a bountiful harvest, but the waters abounded with fish and the woods were filled with deer and wild turkey.

Governor William Bradford and the Plymouth Council deliberated gravely. It was fitting, they thought, to celebrate and give thanks for their good fortune.

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