

# **The Thirteen Colonies: Life and Times Before the Revolution**

According to legend, the Pilgrims first set foot in North America on Plymouth Rock, a large granite boulder on the shore at Plymouth. Today, the rock is enclosed to keep people from climbing on it. Although no reliable evidence exists to support the landing on Plymouth Rock, the story has become part of our national lore.

The Pilgrims called their settlement Plymouth Colony in honor of the English town from which they had recently set sail. With little food, no way to plant and grow food in the winter, and only temporary shelter, almost half the colonists died that first winter. Bradford noted:

In two or three months time, half their company died, especially in January and February, being the depth of winter and wanting houses and other comforts, being infected with the scurvy and other diseases . . . . There died sometimes two or three a day . . . . In this time of distress, there [were] but six or seven sound [healthy] persons who to their great commendations, be it spoken, spared no pains night nor day, but with abundance of toil and hazard of their own health, fetched them [the sick] wood, made their fires, dressed their meat, made their beds, washed their loathsome clothes, clothed and unclothed them.

In spring 1621, the Wampanoag under Chief Massasoit came to the aid of the Pilgrims. A Native American named Samoset visited them and spoke in broken English. Samoset told them of the territories nearby and of another Native American named Tisquantum (Squanto), who had been to England and spoke even better English than Samoset.

Tisquantum's story is remarkable. He had been kidnapped by an English explorer years earlier and had spent time in Spain and England. Later he had returned to America, only to find that his original people (the Patuxet) had died of diseases brought by the Europeans. Tisquantum joined the Wampanoag and Chief Massasoit. When the Pilgrims arrived, he presented himself as a translator, and eventually became an agricultural advisor as well. Tisquantum proved especially helpful to the Pilgrims. He made a peace treaty between the Native Americans and the colonists and taught the colonists how to raise corn, beans, and squash. He also showed them which wild plants were safe to gather and eat.

The Pilgrims learned quickly, and their harvest that fall was good enough to provide food for the coming winter, so they set aside time to give thanks to God.

From previous grades, students should be familiar with the story of the first Thanksgiving, celebrated with the native people. At this feast the Pilgrims most likely ate turkey, duck, or goose, and fish, shellfish, stews, and vegetables. In 1863, President Abraham Lincoln made Thanksgiving a national day of celebration for the blessings Americans receive during the year.

William Bradford records many other interesting details about the Pilgrims in his history. One of the most fascinating stories tells how the Pilgrims first adopted and later rejected a communal style of farming. The original plan was for all the Pilgrims to hold the land jointly, and all to share the fruits of the soil. This was called “the common course and condition,” and it was tried for a few years. However, Bradford noted that the system was problematic:

The experience that was had in this common course and condition, tried sundry years and that amongst godly and sober men, may well evince the vanity of that conceit of Plato’s and other ancients . . . that the taking away of property and bringing in community into a commonwealth would make them happy and flourishing . . . For this community (so far as it was) was found to breed much confusion and discontent and retard much employment that would have been to their benefit and comfort. For the young men, that were most able and fit for labor and service, did repine that they should spend their time and strength to work for other men’s wives and children without any recompense.

To alleviate the confusion and dissent, Bradford and the other Pilgrim leaders decided to assign each head of household some land and a certain amount of seed, and let them all farm for themselves. Bradford says this greatly improved the situation:

This had very good success, for it made all hands very industrious, so as much more corn was planted than otherwise would have been by any means the Governor or any other could use, and saved him a great deal of trouble, and gave far better content. The women now went willingly into the field, and took their little ones with them to set corn; which before would allege weakness and inability; whom to have compelled would have been thought great tyranny and oppression.

Bradford was governor of the colony at the time this happened. He was re-elected 30 times over the next several decades. The colony he governed was very religious. All men, women, and children were expected to attend church.