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Patriots and Pioneers of Rhode Island

Rhode Island in the World War
The Providence Stage after the
Revolution

The First Thanksgiving
The Wantons of Rhode Island

R. I. Hist. Soc.



Presented by
"The Old Stone Bank"
Providence, R. I.

The First Thanksgiving

A LITTLE over three hundred years ago, there were many people in England who became unhappy because their king would not let them worship as they liked. He demanded that their prayers should be the same as the ones he used; and those who didn't use them were often put into dungeons or sent out of the country.

"Let us go away from here," the unhappy Englishmen said to one another. And as soon as they all agreed to leave, they took ship and went to Holland. They called themselves "Pilgrims," because Pilgrims are people who travel far to find something they love, or to find a country whose king is not cruel, and who will let them worship as they like. And these Pilgrims told people that they were journeying "from place to place, toward heaven, their dearest country." The Pilgrims were happy and peaceful in Holland for a while, but they had very little money, and their children learned to speak Dutch like their little foreign playmates. And some of them grew bad and did not want to go to church and worship like their fathers and mothers.

"This will never do," the distressed Pilgrims said to one another. And they gathered together to decide upon what to do. After months of talking and corresponding with friends in England, they decided to go to America and hired two vessels to take them, which they named the Mayflower and the Speedwell. The Speedwell, however, was not seaworthy, and the captain had to turn back before he had got far out to sea. The Mayflower returned with her to pick up as many of the Speedwell's passengers as she could, and then set out alone to cross the vast ocean.

It carried a hundred people in its crowded little cabins, and the passengers were of all ages. The trip was a hard one, for the Mayflower was very small compared to the great ships of today, and the weather was stormy, which made the little ship rock and toss almost every minute of the two months it was on the ocean. It was harder for the children to be uncomfortable than it was for their mothers and fathers, and they often used to be fretful, and cry. There was one thing, though, that always pleased them and brought smiles to their faces—a baby had been born aboard the Mayflower, and he was named "Ocean-us" because he was born on the ocean.

And this little tot's mother used to let the other children come to look at him and play with him.

One cold, wintry November morning the passengers sighted land. They were wonderfully glad that their long, tiresome voyage was so near to an end, but the land they saw looked cold and sandy and barren. Under their brave leader, Captain Myles Standish, some of the Pilgrim fathers went ashore to explore the land and see what sort of people might live there. They saw no white people, only a few wild Indians who were frightened at seeing these strangers, and ran away from them. The Pilgrim fathers made three trips ashore at various places nearby along the coast, and at last they found a place that was beautiful and promised to be comfortable. Here, as they described it, were "fields and running brooks."

So when the place had been chosen, all the weary Pilgrims landed at the spot where the famous Plymouth Rock now stands, and on Christmas Day they began to build their first house. But though they were so happy to have landed at last in a country where they could be free, they suffered severely the first winter. The Pilgrim fathers had to build the houses all by themselves, without any help, and

the icy winter wind brought colds and sickness with it. The Pilgrims had to fight against this without the aid of good solid food, for they had not yet been able to procure any. What supplies they had were very scarce, and not very nourishing.

Many became ill and after a while half of them were in bed at the same time. Those who remained well took care of the others, but in spite of their heroic efforts, half of the brave settlers died before Spring came, and went to "heaven, their dearest country." But after many weeks the sun grew warmer, the snow began to melt, faint green buds began to peep from the tree limbs, and Spring returned again. During the Winter several friendly Indians had visited the Pilgrims, and their friendliness had been returned by a visit of our own men to the Indians. One of the natives, a kindly Indian named Squanto, came to live with the Pilgrims and showed them how to plant their crops of corn, peas, wheat, and barley. And when Summer came, Plymouth was a very beautiful place to be living in. There were all kinds of delicate wild flowers, butterflies, and birds, and when the sun became too warm and bright, the children could go into the cool pine woods.

When Autumn came the Pilgrim fathers had their first harvest, and it was so bountiful that they knew they would be well supplied all during the hard winter that was coming. "Let us thank God for it all," the Pilgrim fathers said with devotion. "It is He who has made the sun shine, and the rain fall, and the corn grow. So at their hearths, and in their little Church, everybody gave thanks to Him for His goodness. Then the Pilgrim mothers said, "Let us have a great Thanksgiving party and invite our friends the Indians, and all rejoice together."

So the next day they made arrangements for the party. Four men went out one morning and were gone all day, returning in the evening with such a great amount of ducks and geese and wild turkeys that the feast could have lasted almost a week. And there was the meat of deer, also. The corn and wheat were made into bread and cakes by the Pilgrim mothers, and fish and clams were brought in from the sea.

Almost a hundred Indians, with their chief, Massasoit, came to the party, and brought with them five deer, which they donated to the Pilgrims. And with everything that had been brought, and the bounty of the great harvest, the Pilgrims had a wonderful feast; and though we

cannot say how long it lasted, we know that the Indians stayed there three days.

The Indians were very kind, but their wild appearance must have frightened many of the children there, for their faces were painted with black stripes, and they had long, long black hair which fell loosely onto their shoulders. They wore deerskin for dress, and they trimmed their hair with fox-tails or feathers. No matter how fearfully they may have looked, they dressed this way with the very best of intentions to show the Pilgrims how much they enjoyed being invited to the feast.

Naturally, the feast was not one long meal. No, there were several, and before each one the Pilgrims and Indians would first give thanks to God. In the evenings the Indians sang and danced, and during the day ran races and taught the children games of skill. Everybody was glad and merry and thankful for all of the three days. The Pilgrims had endured many hardships and loss of loved ones during their first year. But now they wanted to forget all this, for their departed friends had gone to heaven, and the ones remaining on earth could only think of how good God had been to them. So the first Thanksgiving party made them all happy.

The Wantons of Rhode Island

RHODE ISLAND owes much of its early history and traditions of valor and ingenuity to the Wanton family. Edward Wanton, the first of the line in America, is believed to have come from London with his mother. The first known of him in this country was in Boston early in 1658. In his younger days Edward took part in the persecution of the Quakers, but he became so impressed with the tenacity of their faith and with their sublime resignation in the face of adversity that he eventually became a Quaker himself and preached the doctrine.

William and John Wanton were the first of the family to participate in making Rhode Island History. When young men, they separated from their family because of religious differences and came to Newport where they engaged in shipbuilding.

Something of the character of William Wanton, the elder of the two brothers, may be gleaned from an anecdote told about his courtship of Ruth Bryant, daughter of one Deacon John Bryant. The deacon was opposed to the marriage because of religious differences. So one evening William called and in the presence of the Bryant family