

## Today in Our History

### *A Starving Time*

## December 1622-1623



*Pilgrims Starving, 1623, by Granger*

We know that the first feast of the Pilgrims in the fall of 1621, was a huge get-together and a bountiful feast. Edward Winslow's letter details how the ninety Native American guests stayed in Plymouth Colony for a three-day celebration.

When the ship *Fortune* arrived a few days after this grand feast, there were thirty-five more mouths to feed and only three of them were women. Not only that, they came with little more than the clothes they had worn on their journey from England. Governor William Bradford wrote in his journal: "... *there was not so much as biscuit or cake or any other victuals for them, neither had they bedding, but some sorry things they had in their cabins; not a pot nor pan to dress any meat in; nor over many clothes...*"

To make matters worse, the Pilgrim colonists of Plymouth Colony had not prepared for winter after they overestimated their grand harvest. With the additional settlers in Plymouth to feed plus the crew of the *Fortune* needing food for its return voyage on December 13, the food they had was severely rationed. Nearing starvation, Governor Bradford wrote: that "...it would not hold out above six months at half allowance...but they bore it patiently under hope of supply". Edward Winslow recorded this note: "*And indeed, had we not been in a place where divers sorts of shell fish may be taken with the hand, we must have perished.*" By the spring in 1622, their food was gone and the harvest was still months away and many were too weak and weary to help with the raising of their crops. Edward Winslow traveled the Maine coast to trade provisions with English ships. Those he found would donate goods of some sort. When he returned his friends in Plymouth Colony were starving, but what little food he brought back had to be rationed.

The harvest in 1622 was a near failure and some of the crops that matured were even stolen by unfriendly Indians. When the corn supply was exhausted, they had no bread two or three months, and their entire diet consisted of fish and water.

A blessing occurred when the ship, *Discovery*, visited Plymouth Colony once again on its way home to England from Virginia. On the ship were goods to settle their own debt with the merchant adventurers in England. Although William Bradford recorded that Captain Jones was not fair with the exchange of trading items, they gave thanks for the beads ("which were then good trade") and some knives. This trade allowed them to trade with the Native Americans for precious corn. The Pilgrim settlers did not realize the value of corn until the Native Americans shared their Indian corn with them. From his journal, Bradford wrote of their hospitality to old friends aboard the *Discovery*: "...*The best dish they could present their friends with was a lobster or a piece of fish without bread or anything else but a cup of fair spring water... By the time our corn is planted, our victuals are spent, not knowing at night where to have a bite in the morning, and have neither bread nor corn for 3 or 4 months together; yet bear our wants with cheerfulness, and rest on Providence.*"



The Pilgrim settlers' entire diet consisted of fish and water from the nearby stream, known today as Town Brook



An Internet drawing of a shallop

In the winter of 1623, the small shallop had been made into a fishing vessel. The Pilgrim settlers would rotate crews as they fished and unloaded their catches. Until harvest time, they could better live on fish, clams, nuts, and if they were good shots, an occasional deer.

They prayerfully waited for their crops to produce, living only on a few grains of corn for four or five days at a time\*. Unfortunately, the summer brought a very long drought that began turning their wilting crops brown. The Separatist Pilgrims always gave thanks for what they had. One a hot day in July, with no clouds in sight, they prayed for relief. Their prayers were answered the very next morning and, as Edward Winslow wrote, "such soft, sweet and moderate showers...As it is was hard to say whether our withered corn or drooping affections were most quickened and revived." In the meantime, they lived for days at a time with only a few grains of corn\*.

The welcomed relief and revival of their crops became a blessing times two! That same month, sixty new colonists arrived on the ships *Anne* and *Little James*, bringing ships full of goods for their survival. The fall harvest of 1623 was another blessing. Not only was it one of the best crops, it saved the Pilgrims from starvation by supplying food and they learned the art of preparation for winter months.

\*For the descendants of Mayflower passengers, the five kernels of corn are symbols of the Pilgrims' willingness to fight great hardships for their beliefs, and most importantly, of their greatest legacy--a government by consent of the people with just and equal laws. The "Five Kernels of Corn" material is based largely on the work of Susan E. Roser of the Canadian Mayflower Society (as credited by [www.rootsweb.ancestry.com](http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com))

*Of Plimoth Plantation 1620-1647*, by William Bradford - page 96; page 112; page 130

<http://mayflowerhistory.com/letter-winslow-1621>

<http://www.lacolony.org/dps/dr2.html>

<http://www.massmoments.org/moment.cfm?mid=357>

<http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~mosmd/>