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From King James to the First Thanksgiving
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Everyone thought he would be a good king. Queen Elizabeth did. Her Lords did. The Anglican bishops did. And especially the Puritans did. After all, James the VI had been King of Scotland for more than two decades. During that time he had advanced the cause of the Calvinist Reform Church in Scotland (i.e., Presbyterianism).

And why should he not have done so? Even though his mother, Mary Queen of Scots, had baptized him as a Catholic, James had been raised solely in the Scottish Reform tradition, ultimately becoming a learned proponent of its theology.

So certain of their man were the Puritans, the Calvinists within the English Church, that when James became James I of England at the death Queen Elizabeth in 1603, they could not wait until his coronation to present their proposals to reform the English Church. While traveling from Scotland to London, key Puritan leaders met James and presented him with a petition to purify the Anglican church from elements they considered too "popish."

When James held a conference in January 1604 to consider the petition at Hampton Court Palace, matters went wrong from the beginning. Not only were the Puritans missing from the opening-day guest list, but James turned down nearly all their requests. He furthermore threatened that if they did not conform, they would be driven from England. By February 1605, James ordered the Anglican bishops to defrock any minister who preached Puritan beliefs.

James' dislike of Puritanism had a profound affect on a small church in Scrooby, England, one which led them on the "pilgrimage" to America and to the first celebration of Thanksgiving. The local lord of the manor, William Brewster, had been active in promoting Puritanism in nearby parishes.

When Richard Clyfton was expelled from his nearby vicarage, Brewster brought him to the manor and made him pastor of the Separatist church he was gathering in Scrooby. Separatist activity had been outlawed more than a decade earlier and King James was persecuting Separatists even more than Puritans. Indeed, the congregation, numbering about 100, decided in 1608 to leave for Amsterdam to preserve their ability to worship in accordance with their beliefs, an act which was also illegal.

The situation in Holland also threatened the community's survival. At first, the Scrooby congregation joined with other English Separatists only to become involved in arguments over theology and morality which generated widespread distrust and dissension. The Rev. Clyfton eventually joined the other side. Under Brewster's leadership, the Scrooby group then settled in Leiden, where they were able to earn a living. Brewster even began teaching at the university. But Dutch city culture did not fit with Calvinist morality and as many of the children grew older they became more interested in Holland than in the church. They decided to leave.

Brewster and his followers had no funds to travel, so they made a deal with an investment group headed by Thomas Weston. These "venture capitalists" were interested in making money from the new world. They agreed to pay for the Scrooby believers to travel to America in return for their activities in acquiring raw materials that could be sold in England. The investment group chartered a ship called the Mayflower and some 41 of the Scrooby congregation and 61 other adventurers sailed as passengers in September 1620.

The story of the trip's difficulties is well known. They landed far north of their intended destination, half of them died in the first winter, and if the Native Americans had not helped them they would not have been able to grow sufficient food for the second winter.

The exact date of the first "Thanksgiving" is not clear, but it was a celebration after the last harvest in the fall of 1621. The three-day festivities were shared by 90 braves of the Massasoit tribe, the braves donating five deer to the feast. Given New England seasons, the celebration most likely took place before November.

The most important "November event" that first year was the arrival of the ship "Fortune." It brought 35 new residents for the colony (only some from the Scrooby congregation). More importantly the ship was to take goods back to England. The 55-ton ship took aboard beaver and otter pelts (most gained from trading with the natives) and a large quantity of clapboards for house siding. Paying off the first installment of their agreement with Weston and the investment group must have been a major accomplishment to finish out the year and for which to give thanks.