



The Real Thanksgiving Story

Did you know that our Pilgrim forefathers tried communism when they first landed at Plymouth Rock?

How's that for a dramatic beginning to a story? Years ago, when I used to give a lot of talks to high-school classes, this was one of my favorites. It always got the students' attention. And I have to admit, I also enjoyed seeing some liberal teachers get so upset with me they almost lost their lunches.

Here's the story I told those students in those long-ago presentations. The Pilgrims who arrived at Plymouth Rock in 1620 were incredibly brave and hardy souls. They were motivated by the noblest of virtues. They vowed, each and every one, to be as selfless as possible — to always put the needs of the group first. They agreed to own everything in common and to share everything equally.

And their naïve piety almost killed them all.

We all know how the adventure began. A group of devout Christians, seeking religious freedom for themselves and eager to “advance the Gospel of the Kingdom of Christ” in the New World, set sail from Plymouth, England in 1620. An investment consortium known as the Merchant Adventurers of London provided the expenses for the trip, including chartering the *Mayflower* and its 40-man crew.

The deal was simple: The Pilgrims agreed to establish a colony in what is now northern Virginia, where they would plant crops, fish the waters and hunt in the forests. They would return a certain percentage of each year's bounty to London until their debt had been repaid.

Things went wrong from the start. First, the syndicate changed the deal, drastically reducing the amount they would loan the Pilgrims. The brave adventurers were forced to sell many of their own possessions, and much of their provisions, to pay for the trip. As a result, they landed in the New World badly short of supplies.

Next, the small ship they had purchased in Holland, which was to accompany them to America so they could fish the waters off the coast, had to be abandoned in England. Shortly after they set sail, the ship, badly misnamed the *Speedwell*, became “open and leakie as a sieve,” as its captain reported. They returned to Dartmouth, where the boat was dry-docked for three weeks as repairs were made.

But to no avail. After leaving Dartmouth, the group sailed less than 300 miles when the *Speedwell* reported it “must bear up or sink at sea.” This time the ships put in at Plymouth, England, where it was decided to go on without the *Speedwell*. On September 16, 1620, the *Mayflower* set out alone to cross the Atlantic.





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A month later, when they had reached the halfway point, fierce storms battered the ship and threatened the lives of passengers and crew. Many wanted to turn back for England. But if they abandoned the journey, they would lose everything they had invested. The Pilgrims decided to trust in God and sail on.

Despite the storms, the hazards, the crowding and the poor food, only one Pilgrim died during the voyage, a young servant. His death was balanced by the birth of a son to Stephen and Elizabeth Hopkins, who named their child Oceanus.

There were 102 passengers on board the Mayflower — 50 men, 20 women and 32 children — along with a crew of 40. The captain set a course along the 42nd parallel, a bearing that would carry him to Cape Cod. From there he intended to swing south and follow the coast to northern Virginia.

A little more than two months later, on Nov. 19, land was finally sighted and the captain turned the ship south toward Virginia. However, they soon encountered such “dangerous shoals and roaring breakers” that they turned back to Massachusetts. It was then that the grumblings of dissent turned into a full-fledged roar. Many of the passengers insisted on landing in present-day Massachusetts, where “none had power to command them.”

The Pilgrim leaders decided to meet the explosive situation by asking each male on board, except for the crew, to sign a formal document that would lay “the first foundation of their government in this place.” Thus the Mayflower Compact was born.

The Pilgrims were a diverse lot. Many of them were illiterate. Yet in creating the Mayflower Compact, they showed an extraordinary political maturity. They agreed to establish a government by the consent of the governed, with just and equal laws for all. Each adult male, regardless of his station in life — gentleman, commoner or servant — would have an equal vote in deciding the affairs of the colony. Of the 65 men and boys on board, all but 24 signed the agreement. The only ones who did not were the children of those adults who did sign, or men who were too sick to do so.

The first decision made under the covenant was to abandon efforts to reach Virginia and instead to settle in New England. The first explorers landed at Plymouth on Dec. 21, 1620. Weather delays kept the majority from seeing their new home for nearly two weeks. On Jan. 2, 1621, work began on the first building they would erect — a storehouse.

Because provisions were so scanty, it was decided that the land would be worked in common, produce would be owned in common and goods would be rationed equally. Not unlike the society Karl Marx envisioned of “from each according to his ability, to each according to his need.”

Unfortunately, thanks to illness, injury and attitude, the system did not work. Pilferage from the storehouse became common. Suspicions of malingering were muttered. Over the course of that first, harsh winter, nearly half of the colonists perished. Four families were wiped out completely; only five of 18 wives survived. Of the 29 single men, hired hands and servants, only 10 were alive when spring finally came.

The colonists struggled desperately for two more years. When spring arrived in April 1623, virtually all of their provisions were gone. Unless that year’s harvest improved, they feared few would survive the next winter. The Pilgrim leaders decided on a bold course. The colony would abandon its communal approach and permit each person to work for his own benefit, not for the common good.

Here is how the governor of the colony, William Bradford, explained what happened then. This is from his marvelously readable memoir (if you can make adjustments for the Old English spellings), *History of*



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Plimoth Plantation:

The experience that was had in this commone course and condition, tried sundrie years, and that amongst godly and sober men, may well evince the vanitie of that conceite of Plato & other ancients, applauded by some of later times; — that the taking away of properties, and bringing it in communitie into a commone wealth, would make them happy and flourishing; as if they were wiser than God.

For this communitie (so farr as it was) was found to breed much confusion & discontent, and retard much employment that would have been to their benefite and comforte. For yet young men that were most able and fitte for labor & services did repine that they should spend their time & strength to worke for other men's wives and children with out any recompense.

Can you imagine? Some of the youngest and healthiest men in the colony complained that they were working like dogs “for other men's wives and children.” Sounds like the situation in America today, where the taxes taken from those who work support many millions of others who don't.

After three years of noble failure, the colonists had had enough. Once they replaced communal efforts with individual responsibility, the differences were dramatic — and life-saving.

Men went into the fields earlier and stayed later. In many cases, their wives and even their children (some barely past the toddler stage) worked right alongside them. More acres were planted, more trees were felled, more houses were built and more game was slaughtered because of one simple change: People were allowed to keep the fruits of their own labors.

In that simple sentence you will find the solution to all of the world's poverty. Stop taking what others have earned. Let people keep the fruits of their own labors. Then get out of the way and watch the incredible abundance they will produce.

On this Thanksgiving weekend, some 390 years after the Pilgrims celebrated the first of this uniquely American holiday, let us remember the sacrifices they made, the devotion they showed and the lessons they learned.

Until next time, keep some powder dry.

Chip Wood was the first news editor of *The Review of the News* and also wrote for *American Opinion*, our two predecessor publications. He is now the geopolitical editor of *Personal Liberty Digest*, where his *Straight Talk* column appears twice a month. This article first appeared in [PersonalLiberty.com](#) and has been reprinted with permission.



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