



Written by [Denise Behreandt](#) on November 26, 2008

The Pilgrims Weren't Socialists

That is nutshell history as spurious as it is brief. It misrepresents the purpose of the Pilgrims and the results of their heroic strivings. It derives from a superficial appraisal of a statement by Governor William Bradford and a partial reading of the copious records left by the literate Pilgrims.

Stated in the simplest terms, and in their own language, the Pilgrims purposed to lay a good foundation for propagating and advancing the Gospel of the Kingdom of Christ in remote parts of the world. In order to make that possible, they sought financial backing from a group of venture capitalists in England. While in Holland, the Pilgrims gave much consideration to what part of the world they would settle and finally decided upon Northern Virginia, above Jamestown but below the Hudson River. Negotiations with a syndicate called the Merchants and Adventurers of London dragged on for three years. Finally in 1620 the Pilgrims wound up on the wrong end of a bad bargain.



Socialism was never “the dream of the Pilgrims.” They needed no Adam Smith to spell out for them the merits of free enterprise and the necessity for individual responsibility. The business purpose of the expedition was to found a fishery. The Merchant Adventurers agreed to take care of the shipping and to fund the provisions. A contract was drawn up detailing the terms of the repayment and profit sharing, but when the Pilgrims arrived in England from Holland they discovered the terms had been altered, much to their hurt. Sadly, “necessity having no law, the emigrants were constrained to be silent.”

There were three factions aboard the *Mayflower*: the Separatists or Saints from Leyden in Holland; the colonists from London, called “Strangers,” recruited by Thomas Watson, prime mover of the Merchants and Adventurers; and, the ship’s crew, who disliked both.

The contingent of Separatists from Leyden had crossed from Holland to England in their small vessel misnamed the *Speedwell*. It was purchased to be used as transportation and for fishing in the new settlement. She proved a balky ship, heeling way over and soaking her passengers on the short trip. They were seasick and drenched when the *Speedwell* pulled into Southampton harbor and docked alongside the *Mayflower* with its complement of “Strangers” from London. The two groups, unknown to each other but bound together in a perilous undertaking, had only a short time to get acquainted before new problems cropped up.

Christopher Martin, a Puritan, had been named expedition treasurer. He could not get along with the Leyden agents, Deacons Robert Cushman and John Carver. And they were having trouble getting along



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with each other. There was little cooperation in buying provisions and, as a result, the *Mayflower* was stocked with two tons of butter, hardly any guns, and little to use in trade with the Indians.

Thomas Weston, the London adventurer, was denounced as a “bloodsucker” for changing the terms of his agreement and he stomped off to London when the Leyden leaders refused to sign the new agreements. He vowed the Pilgrims would not get another cent from the Merchants and Adventurers. That was a heavy blow because the *Speedwell* captain refused to sail until the vessel’s rigging was changed and that would cost money.

Pleas for help were sent to Weston but he kept his word and sent the Pilgrims nothing. To clear port they had to sell some of their provisions, including most of their butter, leaving them short of supplies.

On August 15th the *Mayflower* and *Speedwell* put to sea with the passengers on the two ships totaling about 120. They sailed rapidly for two days before a stiff wind. Then the *Speedwell*, its captain said, became “open and leakie as a sieve.” The ships put back to Dartmouth where the *Speedwell* was dry-docked for nearly three weeks. The passengers on the *Mayflower* were so unhappy that Christopher Martin, acting as governor on that ship, refused to let anyone ashore for fear they would not return. Toward the end of August, *Mayflower* and *Speedwell* put to sea again. They were more than 300 miles out when the *Speedwell* reported it was leaking and “must bear up or sink at sea.”

This time the ships put in to Plymouth, England, where it was decided to go on without the *Speedwell*. The *Mayflower* would take as many passengers as it could, but 20 would have to be left behind. There were, by that time, plenty agreeable to do so, Deacon Cushman among them. On September 16th, the *Mayflower* set out alone. The Pilgrims had no *Speedwell* for fishing, they would arrive too late for planting, and they had few arms for hunting. Unless Thomas Weston relented there would be no future expedition with additional provisions and help. If they turned back, they would lose everything and be in worse poverty than ever. Saints and Strangers alike agreed to sail on and trust in God.

There were 102 passengers aboard — 50 men, 20 women, and 32 children — with a crew of 40. Only 16 Leyden men had agreed to Weston’s new terms. With them were 11 wives and 19 children. The rest came from London except one from Southampton, the handsome, strapping 20-year-old John Alden, a barrelmaker, hired on a one-year contract to teach the Pilgrims to pack their catches, and four sailors under similar contract to teach them to fish.

Captain Christopher Jones set his course along the 42nd Parallel, a bearing that would carry him to Cape Cod where he intended to swing south to Northern Virginia territory, near the Hudson River.

As week after boring week passed, tensions rose. The Saints and Strangers bickered at each other and the crewmen detested all. The crew cursed them with “greevous execrations” and their worst tormentor among the sailors said he expected to bury half of them at sea and “make merry with what they had.” When, later on, he died in delirium the Saints looked on it as the “just hand of God upon him.”

Halfway across the ocean, the point of no return, the *Mayflower* ran into fierce equinoctial storms. In one, the main beam amidships parted. Captain Jones, fearful for the safety of his ship and crew, was about to turn back to England when Francis Eaton, a carpenter, located the jackscrew he had brought along to be used in house building. With a few turns of the screw the broken ends of the beam were forced into position, two strong timbers were added as props to hold it in place, and the ship was once again sound and on her way to Virginia.

In another storm, John Howland sought relief from the fetid lower deck and was swept overboard. The ship happened to be trailing some halyards, which Howland grabbed and hung on to, although “he was



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sundrie fathoms under water.” Howland was pulled in with a boat hook but was “something ill” from the experience. Despite the storms, the hazards, the crowding and the poor food, only one Pilgrim died during the voyage — William Batten, a young servant of Dr. Samuel Fuller, counterbalanced by the single birth of a son to Stephen and Elizabeth Hopkins, who named him Oceanus.

The remarkable health record, in a day when ships on such expeditions often lost half their passengers, has been attributed to the *Mayflower’s* never before having carried passengers. She was called a “sweet ship,” with seepage from earlier wine cargoes having impregnated the timbers and sterilized the hold.

“After long beating at sea, they fell with that land which is called Cape Cod.” Though “not a little joyful” at their landfall off what is now South Wellfleet, the Pilgrims still were a long way from establishing a colony. Shortly after sighting land on November 19th, Captain Jones headed the *Mayflower* south toward Virginia. By mid-afternoon the ship had fallen “among the dangerous shoals and roaring breakers” of Tucker’s Terror, now known as Pollak Rip. The ship seemed in such great danger that Jones turned about to spend the night off Chatham. On the 20th, the Pilgrims sailed north to seek a fair harbor described to them by Robert Coppin, the second mate, who had been in New England waters before.

They hove to off the tip of the Cape on the night of the 20th and sailed on the next morning into what is now Provincetown Harbor. An unnamed rebellious element among the passengers had no desire to spend their lives in “travailes and labours” for the Merchant Adventurers of London. They said that when they got ashore “they would use their own libertie, for none had power to command them, the patente they had being for Virginia and not New England, which belonged to another government, with which the Virginia Company had nothing to do.”

Before anyone was allowed ashore, however, the Leyden Saints tried to meet the explosive situation with a formal document that laid the “first foundation of their government in this place.” As soon as it was decided to make a landing on Cape Cod, the London faction began quickly advancing the doctrine that, since the colonists were to land without a patent, every man was a law unto himself. He could live in the forest alone, work or play, fish or hunt, and do his will irrespective of the wishes of his associates. That doctrine of each person doing as he pleased so strongly appealed to the Strangers and bound servants that it threatened to divide the colony.

The seditious talk, coming to Master Carver’s ears, caused him to seek the counsel of Brewster, Bradford, and Standish, the Leyden men who were the real movers of the voyage. Seeing their colony in jeopardy, they reread a long and wise letter from their pastor in Leyden, John Robinson, suggesting that each adult male in the colony should have a voice in the government of the colony just as they had in the affairs of the church. They then prepared the “Mayflower Compact.” A bridle of some sort had to be slipped over the heads of the Londoners, a compromise being impossible as one faction was for role, while the other stood for breach of contract and anarchy.

The Compact was written on Friday, the *Mayflower* arrived in what is now Provincetown Harbor on Saturday, and the formal signing took place that morning. Nothing is more evident from the record than that, in drawing up the document, the Saints were merely defining what, in their circumstances, it was absolutely necessary to do. As a practical matter, the giving to every man the right of voting — the choosing of their own officers by the entire body of men, and the discussing of their affairs in town meetings — laid the foundation for a totally new system of government. It is probable that the Pilgrims, in this instance as in others, little foresaw or contemplated the momentous results of an arrangement dictated at the time by stern necessity.



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On November the 21st, before they came to the harbor, Bradford remarked that “observing some not well affected to unity and concord, but who gave some appearance of faction, it was thought good there should be an association and agreement that we should combine together in one body, and to submit to such government and governors, as we should by common consent agree to make and choose; and set our hands....”

Among the colonists were three distinct divisions of society: gentlemen, commoners, and servants. On the dock you would hear Master Carver, Master Winslow, Master Hopkins, so that in addressing gentlefolks it was “Master this,” and “Master that.” But the commoners were called plain Francis Cook or Thomas Rogers or Degory Priest. Being on different social planes as they were, and yet making themselves equals in civil government, was an important innovation. Of the 41 men and servants who agreed to sign away their rights and have them returned with limitation that morning, Edward Dotey and Edward Leister, who were servants of Master Stephen Hopkins, were the last. Of the 65 men and boys on board, 25 did not sign — but they were sons of those who had given their allegiance or men too sick to do so.

The Pilgrims were a diverse agglomerate, many illiterate, but they showed an extraordinary political maturity. They established a government by consent of the governed with just and equal laws for all. They also negotiated a treaty with the Indians which was kept scrupulously and which assured peace to the struggling colony for more than half a century. Deeply in debt to the London Merchants who sponsored them, they worked for more than 20 years as individuals and a community to liquidate the crushing burden. They borrowed money with which to buy out the shares of the Merchants and Adventurers in 1627, and by 1645 they had paid off the entire debt at the astronomical interest rate of 45 percent.

The colonists had intended to become fishermen to meet their debts, but they never did. By early training and inclination the leaders among them were all farmers. They tried fishing, but their little sloop proved inadequate and their nets faulty. Their profits came from farming, and they then expanded into furs, cattle dealing, and trade. In the process they established posts which later became the sites of four other settlements: Augusta on the Kennebec River in Maine, Castine on the Penobscot in Maine, Windsor on the Connecticut River in Connecticut, and Bourne on Cape Cod.

All of those developments came slowly. In the meantime it took a month after reaching Provincetown to locate the site of their first settlement at Plymouth. Bradford’s *History Of Plimoth Plantation* is a daily account as exciting as *Robinson Crusoe* and almost as inspiring as the New Testament account of the acts of the earliest Christians.

The first explorers landed at Plymouth on December 21, 1620, but weather delays kept the others from seeing their new home until a week later. It was Saturday morning, January 2nd, before a storm abated sufficiently for a working force to go ashore with felling axes to cut timbers for the common house. Governor John Carver, accompanied by Stephen Hopkins, who had been in Virginia and was familiar with the latch pines, used for foundation logs, carried a felling ax, marking the trees that were to be cut. While the two notched trees, the others began cutting them.

Most of the Leyden men, farmers in their boyhood days, knew the knack of sending an ax into the heart of a tree. While the chips were flying and the sound of axes echoed through the woods, a sharp lookout was kept for savages. Myles Standish wished to set sentinels round the choppers, but there were so few men, and so much to do, that they decided to take their chances against attack. Their matchlocks stood close by with sparks in readiness.



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Gentlemen, commoners, and bonded servants worked side by side. Even the Elder Brewster and the gray-haired Carver worked at felling trees and cutting branches from them. Standish, too, labored with the lowliest. By noontime, a long line of men, dragging a log, came towards the clearing, their bodies bent forward and straining at every nerve. Every few moments the end of the log would strike an obstruction, or else dig its way into the ground, causing the men to stop with a jerk. Having gained their breath, they would again strive with their load until stopped by exhaustion; it was drudgery of the hardest kind, but every man had hold of the rope. Having neither horses nor oxen, they were themselves compelled to take the placers of animals.

Simply to state that work on the common house began two days later, and was finished all but the thatching on January 19th, eclipses the human element — the Herculean effort involved, the devotion and death of Degory Priest, for example, who gave his every last ounce of energy to the project.

Hardly had work on the common house begun when it was decided that “every man shall build his own house thinking by that course, men would make more haste than working in common.” Though there were 24 married men, only 18 had their wives with them and Mistress Dorothy May Bradford had accidentally drowned while the ship was anchored in Provincetown Harbor. There were thus fifteen single men. Since all could not build houses, the leaders divided the colonists to make 19 households, with each group expected to build a dwelling. The sites were determined by casting lots.

Having completed the common house, the colonists began building a small house to be used as a storeroom for their tools and provisions. They also had to build a house for the sick. With the exception of a corncrib or barn, built just before harvesting their crop the following summer, those were the only buildings built by all hands for common use.

By the middle of February there were four family huts completed. Many of the colonists had made beginnings, but sickness prevented them from finishing. The path was littered with big and little timbers, dragged with infinite toil from the forests by men now too feeble to carry on. These lay where they had been dropped, many never to be moved by the hands that had brought them so far. With the winter came chili winds and frost: still, it was mild as winters go in New England. Unfortunately, influenza is more prevalent in such a winter and the dreadful scourge of sickness and death set in. The great sickness filled the sick house to overflowing with men, women, and children. The common house was likewise filled with beds of rough boards to keep the feeble off the clay floors.

During that time the Pilgrims and the sailors alike were struck by the “general sickness.” Nearly half of the settlers and sailors died in the cold, rainy, and snowy weather when their rations were meager, their shelter scant, and the work load more than their weakened bodies could stand. “They died sometimes two or three of a day ... and ... in the time of most distress there was but six or seven sound persons, who spared no pains, night or day, but with abundance of toil and hazard of their own health, fetched them wood, made them fires, dressed their meat, made their beds, washed their loathsome clothes, clothed and unclothed them.”

Four entire families were wiped out, only three married couples were left unbroken, and only five of eighteen wives survived. The children fared best. The 29 single men, hired hands and servants, were hard hit with 19 of them dying. And in the midst of their travail, “ye Indeans came skulking about them.”

Though the Indians had done nothing harmful or threatening, except to steal a few unguarded tools in the forest, the settlers were ill at ease with the idea that unseen eyes were watching them. They were in



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the midst of a military planning conference on Friday, March 26th, when a tall brave, carrying a bow and arrow, walked boldly down the path straight toward the common house where the meeting was being held.

"Welcome, English, welcome," he kept repeating.

The Pilgrims were dumbfounder and the Indian, who said his name was Sameset, explained that he had traveled from Monhegan Island, a day's journey by canoe to mainland and three days journey on foot to Plymouth. He astonished them more by asking for some beer. Having used up their supply, the Pilgrims gave him "strong water" and sat down to listen to his story — how the Patuxet tribe that lived in their clearing had been overwhelmed by the "plague" of 1617, completely wiped out except for one, the true owner of the land on which the plantation now lay. His name was Squanto and he had survived by having been kidnapped in 1614 and transported to England, where he learned to speak English even better than Sameset, who had learned what he knew of it from English explorers and fishermen at Pemaquid.

Sameset later brought Squanto and the news that the great chief Massasoit, who ruled the entire area, was coming. The arrival of the chief diverted the Pilgrims from Squanto, who was to become their best friend. Sameset disappeared from Pilgrim records and apparently went back to Maine, but Squanto stayed, "and was their interpreter. and was a special instrument sent of God for their good, beyond their expectation. He directed them how to set their corn, where to take fish, and to procure other commodities, and was also their pilot to bring them to unknown places for their profit, and never left them till he died."

By fall the Pilgrims had seven houses and four common buildings. At the common house, ready for shipping back to England, were great piles of wainscoting and clapboards, all sawed by hand and borne from the forests on the backs of the men. Their corn crop was good, though the peas were not worth harvesting. Fowl and fish were plentiful. Those who survived were all restored in health. They had food, shelter, and peace with the Indians. It hardly seemed possible that order and plenty could come out of such misery in such a short time. For all this they were thankful.

The spirit of peace and contentment prompted Governor Bradford to declare a season of thanksgiving. When the granary was under roof and the harvest safely gathered, Elder Brewster on the next Sabbath proclaimed that beginning with the following Tuesday there would be several days of grace and feasting in accordance with the custom of harvest festivals in the North Country of England.

Massasoit was invited and showed up with 90 of his people on Wednesday and stayed for four full days.

The feast lasted several days longer than originally planned as the Indians ranged the woods and brought in five fat deer to prolong the merriment. They had never had such eating and drinking and would have reveled in staying all winter, but, after the noon feast on Saturday, the governor took Massasoit by the hand bidding him "Farewell." Some of the Indians made faces at the command to depart, but the king after much talk gathered all his subjects about him. They were escorted down to the brookside and given a salute by gun volley as they disappeared along the deer path.

The following week the ship *Fortune* arrived from London bringing 35 new settlers. They received an enthusiastic welcome but the merry tunes were soon changed to graver notes when the colonists learned the new arrivals had brought nothing but the clothes on their backs. Most of them were young lads who had sold even their extra clothing at Plymouth, England for money to enjoy the pleasures of the port. They put a fearful strain on the slender supply of food and contributed to the famine that



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bedeviled the colony that winter, spring, and early summer.

The savage Narragansett also threatened the settlement, necessitating the building of a palisade. A wall of pine logs, eight feet high, was constructed. To the drudgery of the day was added guard duty at night. That spring, the colony was bothered by wolves coming down the path, over-running the cornfields at night, digging up the fish which had been planted to fertilize the corn with so much labor during the day. They caused so much trouble that a guard had to be set over the cornfields as well as over the palisade.

By the first week in June the corn in store was exhausted and famine stared the colony in the face. The ducks, turkeys, and other wild fowl were gone, migrated for the season. One could range the shore and forests without hearing chatter. The fish, like the fowl, had also gone — to cooler and deeper water. Though ample enough in the spring and autumn months, fish were scarce in the summer.

The summer days came on apace and grew hotter. A fierce drought developed. When the second week without rain went into the third, and the third into the fourth, even the Indian allies began to prophesy coming evils.

On learning that the *Sparrow*, with a whole fleet of fishing vessels, lay at anchor 40 leagues to the north, Governor Bradford sent Winslow to try to get a supply of provisions. His utmost exertions obtained only enough to supply a little bread each day until harvest. On his return the distress had become extreme.

Had it not been for the clams, alewives, and tidal crabs which they were able to take by hand, the Pilgrims would have perished from starvation. The Indians, boasting how easy it would be to cut them off in their enfeebled condition, insulted them over their weakness; and even their ally, Massasoit, now looked on them coldly.

New trials awaited the Pilgrims, requiring the fullest exercise of their prudence and firmness; and this time they arose neither from sickness, famine, nor Indian hostility, but from the misconduct of their own countrymen. About the end of June 1622, two vessels, the *Charity*, and the *Swan*, arrived at the settlement, dispatched by Thomas Weston to establish a settlement on his own private account somewhere in the neighborhood of Plymouth. As had too often happened in the colonization of Virginia, the men sent out were mostly destitute of industriousness, economy, or principle; “so base,” to quote the words of one contemporary in describing them, “as in all appearance not fit for an honest man’s company.” Evils hitherto avoided by the strict integrity and unyielding firmness of the Pilgrims in their dealings with the Indians were now brought upon them by the reckless, cowardly, and dishonorable behavior of this new body of settlers.

Because Weston had once been among the most zealous friends of the Plymouth colonists, they thought themselves obliged to do all in their power to further his objectives. They treated the newcomers with hospitality consistent with their slender and precarious supplies. But the self-denial which the Pilgrims imposed upon themselves was too irksome to the selfish strangers who, not satisfied with the largest allowance of flour consistent with the little store on hand, basely stole the green corn, prematurely exhausting the resources of their hosts. At length, they moved to a spot called Wessagussett, in Massachusetts Bay, where they decided to plant their colony. The Pilgrims were glad enough to see them go, but unhappily they departed only to work greater mischief at a distance.

The arrival at the end of August of two other trading vessels, the *Discovery* and *Sparrow*, furnished the colonists with a welcome opportunity to obtain knives and beads to exchange with the Indians. Except



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for this providential supply, they would have been worse off than ever, not only having a scant store of corn for the ensuing winter but having no means of carrying on barter.

The wanton and lawless conduct of Weston's people soon produced a conspiracy between the Massachusetts and Paomet Indians to cut off the whole body of the English. On one of his expeditions in search of corn, Captain Standish had a very narrow escape from the knife of an assassin. During his absence, news reached Bradford that Massasoit was deathly ill. He sent Winslow, Hobomack (Squanto's runner), and others to see if they could help. They did save his life and he, in gratitude, exposed the plot among the Indians to exterminate all the white settlers along the coast.

Standish, with eight of the most courageous and trustworthy men at Plymouth, set out for Wessagussett and nipped the conspiracy in the bud by slitting the throats and decapitating four of the murderous ringleaders. Having broken up the confederacy by hacking it off at the top, Standish returned to Plymouth carrying with him the head of the bloodthirstiest conspirator, Wituwamat, which he set on a pike at the fort to terrorize the neighboring Indians. So deep an impression did Standish make by this bold move that the sachems involved in the plot fled to distant hiding places and the colony was delivered from further apprehension of attack.

It is regrettable that the Pilgrims were driven to such an act of summary vengeance by the misconduct of others, for their own dealings with the Indians were ever humane and conscientious. But there can be no doubt that the colonists were menaced with destruction, that Standish would have been murdered but for a providentially sleepless night, and that the ringleaders of such a plot deserved death.

Thus, through manifold trials bravely met, the colony survived into the month of April 1623. April found the settlers still struggling with the same hardships and privations which had beset them at intervals ever since their landing. The whole of their corn save what was reserved for seed was exhausted, and there appeared but little prospect of any immediate relief. Since their escape from starvation seemed wholly to depend upon the success of the coming harvest, they determined upon a new course.

In order to stimulate individual exertion, and "considering that every man, in a measure more or less, loveth and preferreth his own good before his neighbour's," it was decided that each should work for his own private benefit and not for the common good. The land was, therefore, equally divided among the colonists and they commenced their labors in the hope of an abundant return.

Bradford at this point wrote in his journal the often misinterpreted passage which follows:

The experience that was had in this comone course and condition, tried sundrie years, and that amongst godly and sober men, may well evince the vanitie of that conceite of Platos & other ancients, applauded by some of later times; — that ye taking away of propertie, and bringing in comunitie into a comone wealth, would make them happy and flourishing; as if they were wiser then God. For this comunitie (so farr as it was) was found to breed much confusion & discontent, and retard much imployment that would have been to their benefite and comforte. For ye yong-men that were most able and fitte for labor & services did repine that they should spend their time & streingth to worke for other mens wives and children with out any recompence. The strong, or man of parts, had no more in devission of victails & cloaths, then he that was weake and not able to doe a quarter ye other could; this was thought injustice

Brighter days now dawned for the Pilgrims. They had nobly borne the trials of the first settlement and persevered in spite of hardships and difficulties that would have overwhelmed others whose faith and patience were less deeply rooted. And their noble endurance was, at length, appreciated by the



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Company in England, which wrote, "Let it not be grievous to you, that you have been instruments to break the ice for others who come after with less difficulty. The honour shall be yours to the world's end."

Although Pastor Robinson himself was prevented from entering the promised land, a large number of the Leyden exiles eventually found the means to join their brethren at Plymouth and to take part in the success of that enterprise which had been undertaken in prayers and tears, and carried out at the cost of such toil, suffering, and mortality. The work they had proposed to themselves at Leyden, "to lay a foundation for the kingdom of Christ in these remote parts of the world," was accomplished. They had no further ambition, for their treasure was in heaven; nor, with their simplicity of heart and singleness of aim, could they foresee the acclaim destined to clothe their names with glory, nor the extent of the great Republic that would commemorate them by perpetuating their festival of Thanksgiving.

The Pilgrims left no doubt about their preference of God's way, that of individual responsibility in enterprise over communal ownership and control. Would that their spirit were dominant today! The world hath need of it.

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