



A Thanksgiving Reflection: How Private Property and Economic Freedom Saved the Pilgrims

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The First Thanksgiving / Jean Leon Gerome Ferris

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Americans readily accept two opposing ideas about the first Thanksgiving – one bright and highly idealized, the other grey and somber, but closer to the truth. Jean Ferris captured the first idea in a painting completed in 1915, some three centuries after the actual event.

In his *First Thanksgiving 1621*, we see prosperous, black-clad Pilgrims in the company of new-found friends – bare-chested Indians in feathered war bonnets (one of several historical inaccuracies). The "thanks" here are for a bountiful harvest and the early realization of America as a land of milk and honey.

But how could it have been so easy for the settlers to carve a life out of the wildness in a cold and unknown land far from home? Simple answer: It wasn't, as most people instinctively recognize.

Out of 102 passengers on the *Mayflower* who arrived in Plymouth, Massachusetts, in December of 1620, 51, or exactly half, died from malnutrition or disease within a few months. The bereaved survivors must have been painfully aware of the precariousness of their own existence. They included William Bradford, the author of the classic *Of Plymouth Plantation*, who went on to

become governor of the colony for many years. Gravely ill, his young wife, Dorothy May, either fell or threw herself to her death as the *Mayflower* lay at anchor in Cape Cod.

The Pilgrims did not build on a record of success. As Donna Curtin, the executive director of the Pilgrim Hall Museum points out, "Many other colonies (in the Americas) had failed terribly." Set up in 1607, the original English settlement in Jamestown, Virginia, had all but collapsed three years later – with 80-90 percent of its inhabitants lost to starvation and disease. In Ms. Curtin's words, "They had murder, cannibalism, you name it – horrific, brutal conditions." No fewer than 10 colonies set up *before* Jamestown by the Spanish and French had also ended in disaster.

The Pilgrim leaders were well aware of this string of failures, as we know from Bradford's journal. Coming with intact families and a strong sense of community, the Pilgrims bore more than a passing resemblance to the ancient Jews who sojourned in Egypt before going on to find their new home. Having fled religious persecution in England, the Pilgrims spent a dozen years in the Netherlands before fresh troubles there prompted many of their congregation to pin their hopes on the new world.

However, within three years of their landing, Pilgrims faced major problems of their own.

Bradford wrote: "Famine began to pinch them [the Pilgrims] sore."

The investors who paid their passage hoped to get an adequate payback on their investment in the founding company. Fearing that would not be possible if people were free to farm their own land, they insisted upon "a common course and conditions" over the first seven years – under which there were no individual property rights and each member was entitled an equal share of total output.

Bradford recognized the demoralizing aspect of this arrangement. The industrious would subsidize the slackers; the most productive would get no more "in the division of the victuals and clothes" than the least productive. Instead of fostering harmony, communal property led to laziness, envy, thievery, poverty, and social dysfunction – just as it would in the 20th Century through the spread of communism.

In 1623, Bradford and other leaders assigned to every family "a parcel of land" for its own use. With private property came economic freedom and individual initiative. "This had a very good result," Bradford wrote, "for it made all hands very industrious" – leading to a big increase in corn production and far greater "contentment" for the community as a whole.

That's how private property and economic freedom saved the Pilgrims. Happy Thanksgiving!

About the Author



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A former foreign correspondent who spent four years in the Middle East and served as Business Week's London bureau chief during Margaret Thatcher's first two terms as Britain's prime minister, Andrew is a regular contributor to leading national publications, including the American Spectator, the Weekly Standard, and the Wall Street Journal.

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