

Now, the story of the Pilgrims begins in the early part of the 17th century. The Church of England, under King James I, was persecuting anyone and everyone who did not recognize the church's absolute civil and spiritual authority—in effect, the authority of the state. Those who challenged ecclesiastical authority, and those who believed strongly in freedom of worship, were hunted down in England in the 1600s. They were imprisoned and sometimes executed for their beliefs.

A group of Separatists—people who wanted no part of this—first fled to Holland. They liked wooden shoes and cheese and established a community there. After 11 years, about 40 of these Separatists agreed to make a perilous journey to the New World they had heard about—a new, exciting place that hadn't been developed. They knew they would face hardship—hardship beyond what you and I can imagine. We are far too advanced now to truly understand the difficulties these people endured. People from the 1600s would not believe life today; try to explain flight or jet travel, and they wouldn't understand it.

They knew they were facing hardship, but of paramount importance to them was living freely and worshiping God according to the dictates of their own consciences and beliefs. That was the freedom they were denied in England. So, on August 1, 1620, the Mayflower set sail with a total of 102 passengers, including 40 of these Separatists—the Pilgrims. They were led by a man named William Bradford—remember his name.

The journey across the Atlantic was frightening and dangerous. The Mayflower was not much bigger than a 50-foot boat, yet it carried 102 people. During the journey, William Bradford set up an agreement—a contract, if you will—that established just and equal laws for all members of the Pilgrim community. It didn't matter what their religious beliefs were; these were the laws they all agreed to live by.

Where did these laws and ideas come from? We're talking about the Mayflower Compact, which Bradford wrote. The Mayflower Compact was derived from the Bible. The Pilgrims were a people completely steeped in the Bible—both Old and New Testaments. They were devoutly religious people, no matter what else is said about them. They looked to the ancient Israelites for much of their example, and because of the biblical precedent set forth in scripture, they never doubted—because of their faith in God—that their experiment would work. They never doubted they would get to the New World, and they never doubted that, once there, they would thrive.

The journey was long, arduous, and dangerous. When the Pilgrims finally landed in New England in November, according to William Bradford's detailed journal, they found a cold, barren, desolate wilderness. Imagine New England as nothing but rocks and forest—undeveloped nature—in November and getting colder. There were no friends, no shelter of

any kind other than hiding under a tree. There were no hotels, no inns, no places to clean up, no houses. This was real hardship.

The sacrifice they had made for the freedom to worship was just beginning. During that first winter—remember, they arrived in November—half of them, including William Bradford's own wife, died of starvation, sickness, and exposure to the elements.

Now we're getting close to what you were taught in school. When spring finally came—and by the way, writing that doesn't do it justice; spring didn't just "finally come," it was a survival, an act of survival that you and I cannot possibly relate to or understand. American special forces or military people who've been trained might understand what the Pilgrims went through, but you and I can't—we've never done anything like that first winter in the New World.

They survived it. Spring finally came. They did meet the Indians—the Native Americans—who were there and who helped them plant corn and fish for cod. They showed them where the beavers were so the beavers could be skinned for coats and other things. Even with this degree of assistance from the Indians and Native Americans, there wasn't any prosperity yet. They had the Mayflower Compact and these laws, but there was no prosperity. Why?

This is important to understand, because this is where modern American history lessons often end—with the Indians teaching the Pilgrims how to eat, fish, and skin beavers. That's the feel-good story, but it doesn't get close to the true story.

Thanksgiving is often explained in textbooks as a holiday for which the Pilgrims gave thanks to the Indians for saving their lives. That did happen, but Thanksgiving was a devout expression of gratitude from the Pilgrims to God for their survival and everything that was part of it.

Now, here's the part that is often omitted: The original contract the Pilgrims entered into in Holland involved sponsors—they didn't have the money to make this trip on their own. There were merchant sponsors in London and Holland, and these sponsors demanded that everything the Pilgrims produced in the New World would go into a common store—a single bank, if you will. Each member of the Pilgrim community was entitled to one share; everyone had an equal share of whatever was in that bank. All the land they cleared and all the houses they built belonged to the community, to the bank, to the common store. Nobody owned anything; they just had an equal share in it. It was a commune—the Pilgrims established a commune, essentially a forerunner of the communes seen in the 1960s and 70s in California. They even had their own organic vegetables—there was no such thing as processed food back then.

William Bradford, who had become the governor of the colony, recognized that this wasn't going to work. It was costly and destructive. Collectivism—socialism—wasn't working. That first winter had taken many lives, and manpower was greatly reduced. So, William Bradford decided to take bold action.

He assigned a plot of land to each family. Every family was given a plot of land they could work and manage however they wanted. If they wanted to sit on it and do nothing, they could. If they wanted to develop it, grow corn, or build on it, they could. If they wanted to turn it into a business, they could do that. He unleashed the power of the capitalist marketplace—long before Karl Marx was even born. The Pilgrims had discovered and experimented with what could only be described as socialism, and they found that it didn't work. It wasn't called that then, but that's exactly what it was—everyone was given an equal share. What happened? Nobody did anything; there was no incentive, nothing worked.

Bradford and his community found that the most creative and industrious people had no incentive to work any harder than anyone else unless they could utilize the power of personal motivation. While much of the world has been experimenting with socialism for over a hundred years, trying to refine and perfect it, the Pilgrims decided early on to scrap it permanently.

What Bradford wrote about this experiment should be in every schoolchild's history lesson. If it were, we might prevent much suffering. Bradford wrote about the failure: "This community was found to breed much confusion and discontent." In other words, nobody worked; the way they set it up killed and discouraged work. There was no need for young men, most able and fit for labor and service, to spend their time and strength working for other men's wives and children without being paid for it. They thought it was injustice—why work for others when you can't work for yourself?

The Pilgrims found that people could not be expected to do their best work without some incentive. So, what did Bradford's community try next? They unleashed the power of free enterprise and invoked the principle of private property—all the way back in the 1600s. Every family was assigned its own plot of land and could do with it whatever they wanted. Bradford wrote that this had very good success, for it made all hands industrious, so much more corn was planted than otherwise would have been.

When profit and the opportunity to prosper were introduced, things took off. That, my friends, is the essence of the true story of Thanksgiving. The Pilgrims set up trading posts, exchanged goods with the Indians, and sold goods to them. Those profits allowed them to pay off their sponsors in London and Holland. The success of the colony, after abandoning

socialism and trying what was essentially capitalism, spread throughout the Old World. The New World was flooded with new arrivals, and the prosperity of the Plymouth settlement attracted more Europeans, beginning what became known as the Great Puritan Migration.

The lesson is this: The true story of Thanksgiving is that William Bradford and his Pilgrim community were thanking God for the blessings on their community after the first miserable winter—a documented failure brought on by their attempt at fairness and equality, which was socialism. It didn't work; only when they abandoned it did things improve.

The Native Americans—the indigenous peoples—were of considerable assistance and were friendly when the Pilgrims arrived, but they had little, if anything, to do with the prosperity that occurred. That was the result of Bradford and the Pilgrim leadership deciding to change their structure. The Indians assisted, teaching them how to fish and do things they didn't know how to do, which led them to be productive, undeniably. But it was the Pilgrim community itself that experienced this massive prosperity, the word of which spread all the way back to Europe.

One of the most important legacies of the early settlers is that they experimented with socialism in the 1620s, and it did not work. Private property rights and personal responsibility saved the Plymouth Colony from extinction and laid the economic foundation for the free and prosperous nation that we all enjoy today. That is the true story of Thanksgiving.