

THE PROGRESS REPORT

Thanksgiving Day - the True Story

By Fred E. Foldvary

The Thanksgiving Day that millions of Americans celebrate, with turkey and stuffing, is a myth. The true history was forgotten long ago, and even most of the history books have it wrong.

The myth goes like this: The Pilgrims landed in 1620 and founded the Colony of New Plymouth. They had a difficult first winter, but survived with the help of the Indians. In the fall of 1621, the grateful Pilgrims held their first Thanksgiving Day and invited the Indians to a big Thanksgiving-Day feast with turkey and pumpkins.

There was indeed a big feast in 1621, but it was not a Thanksgiving Day. This three-day feast was described in a letter by the colonist Edward Winslow. It was a shooting party with the Indians, but there was no Thanksgiving Day proclamation, nor any mention of a thanksgiving in 1621 in any historical record.

The history of the colony was chronicled by Governor William Bradford in his book, *Of Plimouth Plantation*, available at many libraries. Bradford relates how the Pilgrims set up a communist system in which they owned the land in common and would also share the harvests in common. By 1623, it became clear this system was not working out well. The men were not eager to work in the fields, since if they worked hard, they would have to share their produce with everyone else. The colonists faced another year of poor harvests. They held a meeting to decide what to do.

As Governor Bradford describes it, "At last after much debate of things, the governor gave way that they should set corn everyman for his own particular... That had very good success for it made all hands very industrious, so much [more] corn was planted than otherwise would have been". The Pilgrims changed their economic system from communism to geoism; the land was still owned in common and could not be sold or inherited, but each family was allotted a portion, and they could keep whatever they grew. The governor "assigned to every family a parcel of land, according to the proportion of their number for that end."

Bradford wrote that their experience taught them that communism, meaning sharing all the production, was vain and a failure:

"The experience that has had in this common course and condition, tried sundrie years, and that amongst Godly and sober men, may well evince the Vanities of the conceit of Plato's and other ancients, applauded by some of later times; that the taking away of propertie, and bringing into commone wealth, would make them happy and flourishing, as if they were wiser than God."

Their new geoist economic system was a great success. It looked like they would have an abundant harvest this time. But then, during the summer, the rains stopped, threatening the crops. The Pilgrims held a "Day of Humiliation" and prayer. The rains came and the harvest was saved.

It is logical to surmise that the Pilgrims saw this as a sign that God blessed their new economic system, because Governor Bradford proclaimed November 29, 1623, as a Day of Thanksgiving.

This was the first proclamation of thanksgiving found in Bradford's chronicles or any other historical record. The first Thanksgiving Day was therefore in November 1623. Much later, this first Thanksgiving Day became confused and mixed up with the shooting party with the Indians of 1621. And in the mix-up, the great economics lesson was forgotten and then discarded by the time the Plymouth Colony merged with the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1691.

The Pilgrims recognized that the land itself was and should be their common community property, but that it is proper for the fruits of the labor of each person and family to belong to those who produced them. This was the great economics lesson the Pilgrims learned, a lesson that so impressed them that they commemorated it every year thereafter. This should have been a day to remember their vital economics lesson, but this lesson was later forgotten in the mix-up with the shooting party with the Indians!

This bitter lesson would be learned all over again by the people of the Soviet Union, where socialism and communalism of production failed again. Fortunately the Pilgrims, a smaller community in simpler times, were able to switch quickly and realize the great prosperity that comes from applying the geoist principle of the common ownership of land and the individual ownership of labor.

Thanksgiving Day should be remembered not just as a day when we give thanks for our abundance, but more deeply and historically when we recall why we have this abundance. In our Thanksgiving Day celebrations, let us therefore tell one another the true origins of the thanksgiving and the great economic lesson that it rightfully should remember.