

How Americans principles

By Fred Foldvary

THANKSGIVING DAY is an annual holiday in the United States, celebrated on the fourth Thursday in November. (There is a similar Canadian holiday in October.) Typically, it is a family-orientated festival whose centerpiece is a tremendous roast turkey with cranberry sauce.

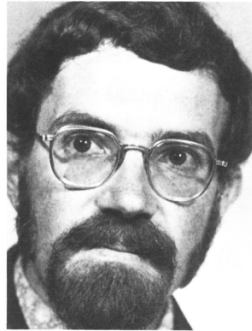
According to American folklore, the custom dates from the thanksgiving day set aside by the *Mayflower* Pilgrims after their first harvest in 1621. After the harsh first winter, when the colonists nearly starved, they were saved by an abundant harvest and had a festival to give thanks to God for their deliverance, and they invited some Indians to share their bounty.

The devotional observance has largely given way to family reunions, sports, and feasting. But the quaint story is still told that the celebration's origin is religious, and in fact Thanksgiving Day remains the least commercialised American holiday.

SUCH IS the legend. But what really happened back in the 1620s? Would a simple accident of fortune leave such a great impression that Americans have remembered and re-enacted the thanksgiving ever since? The social significance of the historical incident has been buried in history and forgotten. But for the facts one needs only to read the chronicle left by the colonists' governor.

The history of the Pilgrims was written by William Bradford, governor of Plymouth for much of its early history. Most of our knowledge of the Pilgrims is based on his book, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, also known as *History of Plymouth Plantation*.

The Pilgrims were religious refugees who had left England, settled in Holland for a time, and then sailed to America from Plymouth, England on the *Mayflower* on September 6, 1620. On arrival in what is now Massa-



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chusetts, they founded the new Plymouth. There were 102 settlers.

Their landing at Plymouth was an accident; they were supposed to have landed much further south, but a storm diverted the ship. The area where they landed was beyond the bounds of their sponsoring company in England, and so they drew up a provisional instrument of government. In the cabin of the *Mayflower* the evening before landing, the heads of families adopted the *Compact of the Pilgrims*, also known as the "Mayflower Compact".

The first winter was one of hardship, most probably from disease. Half the colonists died, including the first governor. Bradford succeeded him. They were joined by 50 more Separatists from Holland in the Spring of 1621.

The sponsors ("adventurers") in England had made an agreement with the Pilgrims for seven years, "during which time," as reported by Bradford, "all profits and benefits that are got by trade, traffic, trucking, work,

fishing, or any other means of any person or persons, remain still in the common stock."

The economic system of the Pilgrims, under terms of their sponsors, was communism. All crops and other "profits" were to be shared with the colony. The colony was to be a literal "commonwealth".

By early 1623, two and a half years after landing, the Pilgrims faced a famine. They were desperate and argued about how they could raise more food. Bradford writes that after much debate, they decided to make a drastic change in their economic system. Bradford writes that in the new system:

"They should set corn every man for his own particular, and in that regard trust to themselves." They "assigned to every family a parcel of land, according to the proportion of their number, for that end, only for present use (but made no division for inheritance)."

Now the corn which a family raised

‘ Prayers ... the drought broke ... and the Pilgrims were celebrating their conversion from communism which had failed, to private enterprise, which had succeeded ’

would no longer go into the common stock. But the land itself remained the property of the community.

Of their experiment with communism, Bradford writes:

"The experience ... amongst godly and sober men may well evince the vanity of that conceit of Plato's and other ancients, applauded by some of later times, that the taking away of



unlearned major 'discovered' by Pilgrims

property and bringing in community into a commonwealth would make them happy and flourishing, as if they were wiser than God. For this community (so far as it was) was found to breed much confusion and discontent and retard much employment that would have been to their benefit and comfort. For the young men... did repine that they should spend their time and strength to work for other men's wives and children without recompense... Let none object this is men's corruption... I answer, seeing all men have this corruption in them, God in His wisdom saw another course fitter for them."

Of the new system, letting each family keep the product of its labor, Bradford wrote, "This had a very good success, for it made all hands very industrious, so much corn was planted than otherwise would have been... The women now went willingly into the fields."

THE PILGRIMS placed all their hopes on the 1623 harvest, but disaster struck. The crop was hit by a "great drought" from May to July. The Pilgrims held a day of humiliation to pray for rain. The drought did break and there was an abundant harvest. They then rejoiced with a day of thanksgiving, so appointed by the governor.

It was common practice in England then to hold days of humiliation during bad times and thanksgiving during good times. There were many



STAMP OF CLASS

- Symbolic landing and the refugees from England weren't slow in showing they had the stamp of enlightenment.

different days of thanksgiving in American history. Why was this one so special?

The Pilgrims were celebrating not just a harvest, but their conversion from communism, which had failed, to private enterprise, which had succeeded! Their re-enactment of this thanksgiving was a celebration of their new economic system, which had provided them with such an abundant harvest, after God had blessed them with rains that saved their crops. There was indeed a religious element to the thanksgiving, but the success of their new economics was what had made the day special.

They were celebrating the right to keep the product of their labor. The holiday became an American tradition. But Americans have forgotten its roots!

In subsequent years, Americans forgot the reason for the special celebration. The thanksgiving day was moved two years forward and confused with a party the Pilgrims held for their Indian friends. The 1623 thanksgiving had been the first one

to be appointed by the governor.

Americans, who think of the Pilgrims as founders of their nation, have also forgotten the hard economics lesson which the Pilgrims learned. The taxation of the products of labor and capital for the "common good" is a step towards the forced communism which failed at Plymouth and elsewhere.

Americans also forgot the wisdom of the Pilgrim founders, who while leaving the fruits of human effort to the producers, kept the land as property of the community so that no one could monopolize the natural opportunities which were given to them by their god.

In subsequent decades the land reverted to private owners, who with rents and speculation – a government-granted privilege – appropriated the fruits of community labor.

The 1623 economic conversion gave the Pilgrims the best of all economic conditions: equal access to natural opportunities – land – and the ability to keep what was properly theirs by human effort. It was not just a holiday's origins that Americans have forgotten. The far greater loss was the economic insight which the founders of America learned from experience.

It took the Pilgrims two years to learn their lesson. How long will it take us?

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