



**The Pilgrims of Plymouth Colony: A Survival Story**  
*by Karen Lees*

Few public school students remain who remember the true story of the Pilgrim's first few years in Plymouth Colony. The historic record was at one time a valuable part of American education. Essential lessons were learned from the failure of our nation's first disastrous experiment with communism. The first settler's failure actually birthed the implementation of free market economics in the new world.

The truth of much of America's history simply does not support the politically correct narrative of today's textbook authors, so the truth has dwindled into obscurity over the many years of revision. J.R.R. Tolkien commented on how history can be lost when he wrote in "Lord of the Rings", "History became legend. Legend became myth. [And after many years it] passed out of all knowledge."

Children are led to believe a myth that goes something like this: That first Thanksgiving of 1621, because the Pilgrims were incompetent farmers and hunters, they nearly starved to death in their new home. The following spring, the kindly local Indians showed them how to plant crops and hunt wild game. When the next harvest season came around, their crops were so bountiful that the Pilgrims held a celebration to thank the Indians for saving their lives. Aside from being factually inaccurate, this narrative leaves out some important information essential to understanding principles of liberty.

Plymouth Colony, founded in 1620, was governed by a pre-determined social contract. The original charter, mandated by the investors who financed the Pilgrim's endeavor, called for a system of communal property and labor. Much like today, this system was the popular prevailing political theory at the time in Europe and Britain.

In a [Forbes 2012 article](#), Jerry Bowyer writes, "The charter of the Plymouth Colony reflected the most up-to-date economic, philosophical and religious thinking of the early 17th century. Plato was in vogue then, and Plato believed

in central planning by intellectuals in the context of communal property, centralized state education, state centralized cultural offerings and communal family structure. For Plato, it literally did take a village to raise a child.”

An English [writer in 1844 described](#) the devastation which existed when his nation experimented with communism: "Full one third of our population [in the United Kingdom] subsist entirely, or rather starve, upon potatoes alone, another third have, in addition to this edible, oaten or inferior wheaten bread, with one or two meals of fat pork, or the refuse of the shambles [slaughterhouses], per week; while a considerable majority of the re-maining third seldom are able to procure an ample daily supply of good butcher's meat or obtain the luxury of poultry from year to year...On the continent of Europe, population is still in a worse condition..."

Human nature being what it is, the communal system lacks the essential built-in motivation to work. The natural principle of incentives toward productivity cannot be thwarted - no matter how much man tries to get around it. As old as mankind is the principle “If you don’t work, you don’t eat”.

In order to find true satisfaction and happiness, each human in some way, big or small, must be as productive as they are able in order to gain satisfaction and enjoy the fruits of their labor. Many youth, especially of earlier generations, learned a strong work ethic by earning an allowance, working an after-school job, working on the family farm, or by starting their own small business

Founder of the Plymouth Colony, Governor William Bradford, recorded in his diary [“Of Plymouth Plantation”](#) that the people had been known for their “virtue and hard work”, but under the communal system, became “lazy and unproductive”.

Many modern-day descendants of the Pilgrims observe a Thanksgiving tradition to remind themselves of their ancestor’s failed experiment and near extinction. Each family member around the table places three kernels of corn on their plate. This was the ration each Pilgrim had during the difficult early days of communal living in the Plymouth Colony.

After two and a half years, with more than half of the Pilgrim population taken by starvation and disease, the decision was made to ditch the charter promoting the system of communism and opt for a system where each should keep the fruits of their own labor.

William Bradford then wrote, “All this while no supply was heard of, neither

knew when they might expect any. So they began to think how they might raise as much corn as they could, and obtain a better crop than they had done, that they might not still thus languish in misery. At length, after much debate of things, the Governor (with ye advise of ye chieftest among them) gave way that they should set come every man for his own particular, and in that regard trust to themselves... And so 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) and ranged all boys and youth under some family. This had very good success; for it made all hands very industrious, so as much more corn was planted then other ways would have been by any means ye Governor or any other could use, and saved him a great deal of trouble, and gave far better content. The women now went willingly into ye field, and took their little ones with them to set corn, which before would allege weakness, and inability; whom to have compelled would have been thought great tyranny and oppression.”

As a result of applying a principle grounded in the natural right to keep the fruits of one’s own labor, the new colony not only survived but thrived. Thus, the iconic first Thanksgiving of 1623 was celebrated with a feast that has endured as tradition for more than 400 years.

Thanksgiving is part of our American heritage and is now imbedded in the DNA of our culture. Of course, the Indians had come to the aid of the settlers, just as the settlers had also helped their native neighbors. The Indians were invited guests who contributed to the Thanksgiving feast to celebrate their mutual blessings together as friends and to give thanks to God. But it was the principle of liberty that saved the Pilgrim’s lives - keeping the fruits of one’s own labor - that fostered the settler’s ability to survive and thrive.

Bradford concluded, “Let none object this - is men’s corruption, and nothing to ye course itself. I answer, seeing all men have this corruption in them, God in his wisdom saw another course fitter for them.”

*The Language of Liberty series is a collaborative effort of the Center for Self Governance (CSG) Administrative Team. The authors include administrative staff, selected students, and guest columnists. They may be contacted at [info@tnesg.org](mailto:info@tnesg.org) To learn more, go to [CenterForSelfGovernance.com](http://CenterForSelfGovernance.com).*

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