

Among the Pilgrims' sources of information about New England were probably the maps of Samuel de Champlain, including this chart of Patuxet (Plymouth) when it was still an Indian village, before the plague of 1617.

quickly." *Promise* then ties this unrest to the Mayflower Compact, giving its readers a fresh interpretation of why the colonists adopted the agreement and why it was so democratic: "To avoid rebellion, the Pilgrim leaders made a remarkable concession to the other colonists. They issued a call for every male on board, regardless of religion or economic status, to join in the creation of a 'civil body politic.'" The compact achieved its purpose: the majority acquiesced.

Actually, the hijacking hypothesis does not show the Pilgrims in such a bad light. The compact provided a graceful solution to an awkward problem. Although hijacking and false representation doubtless were felonies then as now, the colony did survive with a lower death rate than Virginia, so no permanent harm was done. The whole story places the Pilgrims in a somewhat dishonorable light, however, which may explain why only one textbook selects it.

The "navigation error" story lacks plausibility: the one parameter of ocean travel that sailors could and did measure accurately in that era was latitude—distance north or south from the equator. The "storms" excuse is perhaps still less plausible, for if a storm blew them off course, when the weather cleared they could have turned southward again, sailing out to sea to bypass any shoals. They had plenty of food and

beer, after all.⁵¹ But storms and pilot error leave the Pilgrims pure of heart, which may explain why the other eleven textbooks choose one of the two.

Regardless of motive, the Mayflower Compact provided a democratic basis for the Plymouth colony. Since the framers of our Constitution in fact paid the compact little heed, however, it hardly deserves the attention textbook authors lavish on it. But textbook authors clearly want to package the Pilgrims as a pious and moral band who laid the antecedents of our democratic traditions. Nowhere is this motive more embarrassingly obvious than in John Garraty's *American History*. "So far as any record shows, this was the first time in human history that a group of people consciously created a government where none had existed before." Here Garraty paraphrases a Forefathers' Day speech, delivered in Plymouth in 1802, in which John Adams celebrated "the only instance in human history of that positive, original social compact." George Willison has dryly noted that Adams was "blinking several salient facts—above all, the circumstances that prompted the compact, which was plainly an instrument of minority rule."⁵² Of course, Garraty's paraphrase also exposes his ignorance of the Republic of Iceland, the Iroquois Confederacy, and countless other polities antedating 1620. Such an account simply invites students to become ethnocentric.

In their pious treatment of the Pilgrims, history textbooks introduce the archetype of American exceptionalism. According to *The American Pageant*, "This rare opportunity for a great social and political experiment may never come again." *The American Way* declares, "The American people have created a unique nation." How is America exceptional? Surely we're exceptionally *good*. As Woodrow Wilson put it, "America is the only idealistic nation in the world."⁵³ And the goodness started at Plymouth Rock, according to our textbooks, which view the Pilgrims as Christian, sober, democratic, generous to the Indians, God-thanking. Such a happy portrait can be painted only by omitting the facts about the plague, the possible hijacking, and the Indian relations.

For that matter, our culture and our textbooks underplay or omit Jamestown and the sixteenth-century Spanish settlements in favor of Plymouth Rock as the archetypal birthplace of the United States. Virginia, according to T. H. Breen, "ill-served later historians in search of the mythic origins of American culture."⁵⁴ Historians could hardly tout Virginia as moral in intent; in the words of the first history of Virginia written by a Virginian: "The chief Design of all Parties concern'd was to fetch away the Treasure from thence, aiming more at sudden Gain, than to form any regular Colony."⁵⁵ The Virginians' relations with the Indians were particularly unsavory: in contrast to Squanto, a volunteer, the

British in Virginia took Indian prisoners and forced them to teach colonists how to farm.⁵⁶ In 1623 the British indulged in the first use of chemical warfare in the colonies when negotiating a treaty with tribes near the Potomac River, headed by Chiskiack. The British offered a toast “symbolizing eternal friendship,” whereupon the chief, his family, advisors, and two hundred followers dropped dead of poison.⁵⁷ Besides, the early Virginians engaged in bickering, sloth, even cannibalism. They spent their early days digging random holes in the ground, haplessly looking for gold instead of planting crops. Soon they were starving and digging up putrid Indian corpses to eat or renting themselves out to Indian families as servants—hardly the heroic founders that a great nation requires.⁵⁸

Textbooks indeed cover the Virginia colony, and they at least mention the Spanish settlements, but they devote 50 percent more space to Massachusetts. As a result, and due also to Thanksgiving, of course, students are much more likely to remember the Pilgrims as our founders.⁵⁹ They are then embarrassed when I remind them of Virginia and the Spanish, for when prompted students do recall having heard of both. But neither our culture nor our textbooks give Virginia the same archetypal status as Massachusetts. That is why almost all my students know the name of the Pilgrims’ ship, while almost no students remember the names of the three ships that brought the British to Jamestown. (For the next time you’re on *Jeopardy*, they were the *Susan Constant*, the *Discovery*, and the *Goodspeed*.)

Despite having ended up many miles from other European enclaves, the Pilgrims hardly “started from scratch” in a “wilderness.” Throughout southern New England, Native Americans had repeatedly burned the underbrush, creating a parklike environment. After landing at Provincetown, the Pilgrims assembled a boat for exploring and began looking around for their new home. They chose Plymouth because of its beautiful cleared fields, recently planted in corn, and its useful harbor and “brook of fresh water.” It was a lovely site for a town. Indeed, until the plague, it had been a town, for “New Plimoth” was none other than Squanto’s village of Patuxet! The invaders followed a pattern: throughout the hemisphere Europeans pitched camp right in the middle of Native populations—Cuzco, Mexico City, Natchez, Chicago. Throughout New England, colonists appropriated Indian cornfields for their initial settlements, avoiding the backbreaking labor of clearing the land of forest and rock.⁶⁰ (This explains why, to this day, the names of so many towns throughout the region—Marshfield, Springfield, Deerfield—end in *field*.) “Errand into the wilderness” may have made a lively sermon title in 1650, a popular book title in 1950, and an archetypal textbook phrase

in 1990, but it was never accurate. The new settlers encountered no wilderness: “In this bay wherein we live,” one colonist noted in 1622, “in former time hath lived about two thousand Indians.”⁶¹

Moreover, not all the Native inhabitants had perished, and the survivors now facilitated British settlement. The Pilgrims began receiving Indian assistance on their second full day in Massachusetts. A colonist’s journal tells of sailors discovering two Indian houses:

Having their guns and hearing nobody, they entered the houses and found the people were gone. The sailors took some things but didn’t dare stay. . . . We had meant to have left some beads and other things in the houses as a sign of peace and to show we meant to trade with them. But we didn’t do it because we left in such haste. But as soon as we can meet with the Indians, we will pay them well for what we took.

It wasn’t only houses that the Pilgrims robbed. Our eyewitness resumes his story:

We marched to the place we called Cornhill, where we had found the corn before. At another place we had seen before, we dug and found some more corn, two or three baskets full, and a bag of beans. . . . In all we had about ten bushels, which will be enough for seed. It was with God’s help that we found this corn, for how else could we have done it, without meeting some Indians who might trouble us.

From the start, the Pilgrims thanked God, not the Indians, for assistance that the latter had (inadvertently) provided—setting a pattern for later thanksgivings. Our journalist continues:

The next morning, we found a place like a grave. We decided to dig it up. We found first a mat, and under that a fine bow. . . . We also found bowls, trays, dishes, and things like that. We took several of the prettiest things to carry away with us, and covered the body up again.⁶²

A place “like a grave”!

Although Karen Kupperman says the Pilgrims continued to rob graves for years,⁶³ more help came from a live Indian, Squanto. Here my students return to familiar turf, for they have all learned the Squanto legend. *Land of Promise* provides a typical account:

Squanto had learned their language, he explained, from English fishermen who ventured into the New England waters each summer. Squanto

taught the Pilgrims how to plant corn, squash, and pumpkins. Would the small band of settlers have survived without Squanto's help? We cannot say. But by the fall of 1621, colonists and Indians could sit down to several days of feast and thanksgiving to God (later celebrated as the first Thanksgiving).

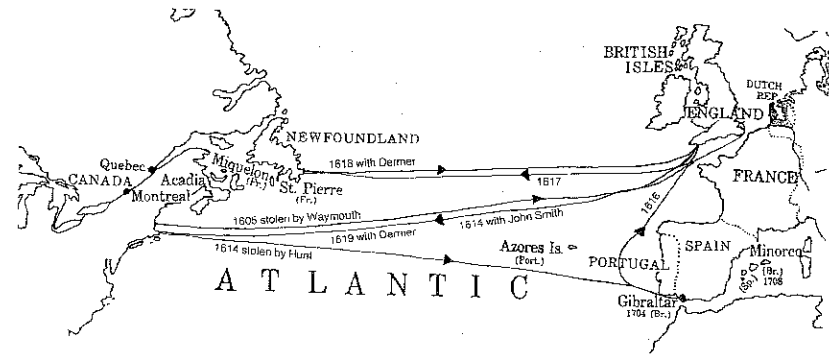
What do the books leave out about Squanto? First, how he learned English. According to Ferdinando Gorges, around 1605 a British captain stole Squanto, who was then still a boy, along with four Penobscots, and took them to England. There Squanto spent nine years, three in the employ of Gorges. At length, Gorges helped Squanto arrange passage back to Massachusetts. Some historians doubt that Squanto was among the five Indians stolen in 1605.⁶⁴ All sources agree, however, that in 1614 a British slave raider seized Squanto and two dozen fellow Indians and sold them into slavery in Málaga, Spain. What happened next makes Ulysses look like a homebody. Squanto escaped from slavery, escaped from Spain, and made his way back to England. After trying to get home via Newfoundland, in 1619 he talked Thomas Dermer into taking him along on his next trip to Cape Cod.

It happens that Squanto's fabulous odyssey provides a "hook" into the plague story, a hook that our textbooks choose not to use. For now Squanto set foot again on Massachusetts soil and walked to his home village of Patuxet, only to make the horrifying discovery that "he was the sole member of his village still alive. All the others had perished in the epidemic two years before."⁶⁵ No wonder Squanto threw in his lot with the Pilgrims.

Now *that* is a story worth telling! Compare the pallid account in *Land of Promise*: "He had learned their language from English fishermen."

As translator, ambassador, and technical advisor, Squanto was essential to the survival of Plymouth in its first two years. Like other Europeans in America, the Pilgrims had no idea what to eat or how to raise or find it until Indians showed them. William Bradford called Squanto "a special instrument sent of God for their good beyond their expectation. He directed them how to set their corn, where to take fish, and to procure other commodities, and was also their pilot to bring them to unknown places for their profit." Squanto was not the Pilgrims' only aide: in the summer of 1621 Massasoit sent another Indian, Hobomok, to live among the Pilgrims for several years as guide and ambassador.⁶⁶

"Their profit" was the primary reason most *Mayflower* colonists made the trip. As Robert Moore has pointed out, "Textbooks neglect to analyze the profit motive underlying much of our history."⁶⁷ Profit too



Squanto's travels acquainted him with more of the world than any Pilgrim encountered. He had crossed the Atlantic perhaps six times, twice as a British captive, and had lived in Maine, Newfoundland, Spain, and England, as well as Massachusetts.

came from the Indians, by way of the fur trade, without which Plymouth would never have paid for itself. Hobomok helped Plymouth set up fur trading posts at the mouth of the Penobscot and Kennebec rivers in Maine; in Aptuxet, Massachusetts; and in Windsor, Connecticut.⁶⁸ Europeans had neither the skill nor the desire to "go boldly where none dared go before." They went to the Indians.⁶⁹

All this brings us to Thanksgiving. Throughout the nation every fall, elementary school children reenact a little morality play, *The First Thanksgiving*, as our national origin myth, complete with Pilgrim hats made out of construction paper and Indian braves with feathers in their hair. Thanksgiving is the occasion on which we give thanks to God as a nation for the blessings that He [*sic*] hath bestowed upon us. More than any other celebration, more even than such overtly patriotic holidays as Independence Day and Memorial Day, Thanksgiving celebrates our ethnocentrism. We have seen, for example, how King James and the early Pilgrim leaders gave thanks for the plague, which proved to them that God was on their side. The archetypes associated with Thanksgiving—God on our side, civilization wrested from wilderness, order from disorder, through hard work and good Pilgrim character traits—continue to radiate from our history textbooks. More than sixty years ago, in an analysis of how American history was taught in the 1920s, Bessie Pierce pointed out the political uses to which Thanksgiving is put: "For these unexcelled blessings, the pupil is urged to follow in the footsteps of his forbears, to offer unquestioning obedience to the law of the land, and to carry on the work begun."⁷⁰

Thanksgiving dinner is a ritual, with all the characteristics that Mircea Eliade assigns to the ritual observances of origin myths:

1. It constitutes the history of the acts of the founders, the Supernaturals.
2. It is considered to be true.
3. It tells how an institution came into existence.
4. In performing the ritual associated with the myth, one "'experiences' knowledge of the origin" and claims one's patriarchy.
5. Thus one "lives" the myth, as a religion.⁷¹

My Random House dictionary lists as its main heading for the Plymouth colonists not *Pilgrims* but *Pilgrim Fathers*. The Library of Congress similarly catalogs its holdings for Plymouth under *Pilgrim Fathers*, and of course *fathers* is capitalized, meaning "fathers of our country," not of Pilgrim children. Thanksgiving has thus moved from history into the field of religion, "civil religion," as Robert Bellah has called it. To Bellah, civil religions hold society together. Plymouth Rock achieved iconographic status around 1880, when some enterprising residents of the town rejoined its two pieces on the waterfront and built a Greek templet around it. The templet became a shrine, the Mayflower Compact became a sacred text, and our textbooks began to play the same function as the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer*, teaching us the meaning behind the civil rite of Thanksgiving.⁷²

The religious character of Pilgrim history shines forth in an introduction by Valerian Paget to William Bradford's famous chronicle *Plymouth Plantation*: "The eyes of Europe were upon this little English handful of unconscious heroes and saints, taking courage from them step by step. For their children's children the same ideals of Freedom burned so clear and strong that . . . the little episode we have just been contemplating, resulted in the birth of the United States of America, and, above all, of the establishment of the humanitarian ideals it typifies, and for which the Pilgrims offered their sacrifice upon the altar of the Sonship of Man."⁷³ In this invocation, the Pilgrims supply not only the origin of the United States, but also the inspiration for democracy in Europe and perhaps for all goodness in the world today! I suspect that the original colonists, Separatists and Anglicans alike, would have been amused.

The civil ritual we practice marginalizes Indians. Our archetypal image of the first Thanksgiving portrays the groaning boards in the woods, with the Pilgrims in their starched Sunday best next to their almost naked Indian guests. As a holiday greeting card puts it, "I is for the Indians we invited to share our food." The silliness of all this reaches

its zenith in the handouts that schoolchildren have carried home for decades, complete with captions such as, "They served pumpkins and turkeys and corn and squash. The Indians had never seen such a feast!" When the Native American novelist Michael Dorris's son brought home this "information" from his New Hampshire elementary school, Dorris pointed out that "the *Pilgrims* had literally never seen 'such a feast,' since all foods mentioned are exclusively indigenous to the Americas and had been provided *by* [or with the aid of] the local tribe."⁷⁴

This notion that "we" advanced peoples provided for the Indians, exactly the converse of the truth, is not benign. It reemerges time and again in our history to complicate race relations. For example, we are told that white plantation owners furnished food and medical care for their slaves, yet every shred of food, shelter, and clothing on the plantations was raised, built, woven, or paid for by black labor. Today Americans believe as part of our political understanding of the world that we are the most generous nation on earth in terms of foreign aid, overlooking the fact that the net dollar flow from almost every Third World nation runs *toward* the United States.

The true history of Thanksgiving reveals embarrassing facts. The Pilgrims did not introduce the tradition; Eastern Indians had observed autumnal harvest celebrations for centuries. Although George Washington did set aside days for national thanksgiving, our modern celebrations date back only to 1863. During the Civil War, when the Union needed all the patriotism that such an observance might muster, Abraham Lincoln proclaimed Thanksgiving a national holiday. The Pilgrims had nothing to do with it; not until the 1890s did they even get included in the tradition. For that matter, no one used the term *Pilgrims* until the 1870s.⁷⁵

The ideological meaning American history has ascribed to Thanksgiving compounds the embarrassment. The Thanksgiving legend makes Americans ethnocentric. After all, if our culture has God on its side, why should we consider other cultures seriously? This ethnocentrism intensified in the middle of the last century. In *Race and Manifest Destiny*, Reginald Horsman has shown how the idea of "God on our side" was used to legitimate the open expression of Anglo-Saxon superiority vis-à-vis Mexicans, Native Americans, peoples of the Pacific, Jews, and even Catholics.⁷⁶ Today, when textbooks promote this ethnocentrism with their Pilgrim stories, they leave students less able to learn from and deal with people from other cultures.

On occasion, we pay a more direct cost: censorship. In 1970, for example, the Massachusetts Department of Commerce asked the Wampanoags to select a speaker to mark the 350th anniversary of the Pil-

grims' landing. Frank James "was selected, but first he had to show a copy of his speech to the white people in charge of the ceremony. When they saw what he had written, they would not allow him to read it."⁷⁷ James had written:

Today is a time of celebrating for you . . . but it is not a time of celebrating for me. It is with heavy heart that I look back upon what happened to my People. . . . The Pilgrims had hardly explored the shores of Cape Cod four days before they had robbed the graves of my ancestors, and stolen their corn, wheat, and beans. . . . Massasoit, the great leader of the Wampanoag, knew these facts; yet he and his People welcomed and befriended the settlers . . . , little knowing that . . . before 50 years were to pass, the Wampanoags . . . and other Indians living near the settlers would be killed by their guns or dead from diseases that we caught from them. . . . Although our way of life is almost gone and our language is almost extinct, we the Wampanoags still walk the lands of Massachusetts. . . . What has happened cannot be changed, but today we work toward a better America, a more Indian America where people and nature once again are important.⁷⁸

What the Massachusetts Department of Commerce censored was not some incendiary falsehood but historical truth. Nothing James would have said, had he been allowed to speak, was false, excepting the word *wheat*. Our textbooks also omit the facts about grave robbing, Indian enslavement, the plague, and so on, even though they were common knowledge in colonial New England. For at least a century Puritan ministers thundered their interpretation of the meaning of the plague from New England pulpits. Thus our popular history of the Pilgrims has not been a process of gaining perspective but of deliberate forgetting. Instead of these important facts, textbooks supply the feel-good minutiae of Squanto's helpfulness, his name, the fish in the cornhills, sometimes even the menu and the number of Indians who attended the prototypical first Thanksgiving.

I have focused here on untoward detail only because our histories have suppressed everything awkward for so long. The Pilgrims' courage in setting forth in the late fall to make their way on a continent new to them remains unsurpassed. In their first year the Pilgrims, like the Indians, suffered from diseases, including scurvy and pneumonia; half of them died. It was not immoral of the Pilgrims to have taken over Patuxet. They did not cause the plague and were as baffled as to its origin as the stricken Indian villagers. Massasoit was happy that the Pilgrims were using the bay, for the Patuxet, being dead, had no more

need for the site. Pilgrim-Indian relations started reasonably positively. Plymouth, unlike many other colonies, usually paid the Indians for the land it took. In some instances Europeans settled in Indian towns because Indians had *invited* them, as protection against another tribe or a nearby competing European power.⁷⁹ In sum, U.S. history is no more violent and oppressive than the history of England, Russia, Indonesia, or Burundi—but neither is it exceptionally less violent.

The antidote to feel-good history is not feel-bad history but honest and inclusive history. If textbook authors feel compelled to give moral instruction, the way origin myths have always done, they could accomplish this aim by allowing students to learn both the "good" and the "bad" sides of the Pilgrim tale. Conflict would then become part of the story, and students might discover that the knowledge they gain has implications for their lives today. Correctly taught, the issues of the era of the first Thanksgiving could help Americans grow more thoughtful and more tolerant, rather than more ethnocentric.

Origin myths do not come cheaply. To glorify the Pilgrims is dangerous. The genial omissions and the invented details with which our textbooks retail the Pilgrim archetype are close cousins of the overt censorship practiced by the Massachusetts Department of Commerce in denying Frank James the right to speak. Surely, in history, "truth should be held sacred, at whatever cost."