

The Pilgrims, Plymouth
&
Thanksgiving
The Backstory



A Brief History
by Jeffrey Breshears

The Pilgrims, Plymouth and Thanksgiving: The Backstory

Jefrey Breshears

NOTE: This Thanksgiving – November 25, 2021 – marks the 400th anniversary of the original Thanksgiving feast as celebrated by the “Pilgrims” of Plymouth colony and their Native American neighbors in the autumn of 1621. Although generally a familiar story to many Americans, the backstory is not only fascinating but essentially relevant to our identity as American Christians. This is particularly significant at such a time as this when our heritage and traditions are being undermined and discredited by an insidious coalition of secular forces that have infiltrated, infested and taken control of most of our cultural institutions. Not only are basic Judeo-Christian moral values under attack, but religious liberty itself is seriously threatened by this radical secular agenda.

Whether we call it Cultural Marxism, Critical Theory or Political Correctness, this ideology is systematically destroying the moral and spiritual foundations of our nation with its vicious and unrelenting assaults on America’s Christian-influenced heritage that made this nation unique in all of human history. The following is a brief account of the major issues and events related to the Pilgrims, Plymouth and Thanksgiving – including the origins of America’s ongoing culture war – that all Christians should know.

Prologue: An Eery Prophecy

Around 1615 a French ship wrecked off the coast of Massachusetts. Several crewmen struggled ashore, whereupon local natives killed most of them and enslaved the rest. One of the survivors warned his captors that “God was angry with them for their wickedness, and would destroy them, and give their country to another people.” The Indians laughed at him, saying that they were so numerous that the white man’s god could not possibly kill them. He replied that “God has many ways to destroy ye that ye know not.” Within a year an epidemic struck the tribes in the area, killing over 90% of them. As thousands died, the natives’ faith in their traditional religion was also shaken.

Pilgrim Separatists

The “Pilgrims” of Plymouth colony were Separatists – radical **nonconformists** who believed the Church of England was too corrupt to be reformed. As such, Separatists advocated a return to the simplicity of New Testament Christianity and the autonomy of each local congregation. Separatists were never numerous in England – only a few thousand. The Pilgrims had been part of a Separatist congregation that was formed in the early 1600s in the village of Scrooby. The leader of the Scrooby church, **John Robinson** (1576-1625), was a graduate of Cambridge University who had been ordained

a priest in the Anglican Church at age 22. However, like other nonconformists at the time, Robinson came to believe that the state Church was unreformable, and he finally broke with the Anglican Church in 1606. That same year the Christian congregation in Scrooby also voted to sever all ties with the Church of England. The following year Robinson moved to Scrooby and served as the church's assistant pastor. At the time, the church met at the home of Elder **William Brewster** (1566-1644), one of the original organizers of the church and a friend of Robinson as well as a Cambridge alumnus. Other notable figures in the group included **William Bradford** (1590-1657), who years later served as governor of Plymouth colony and wrote a detailed history of the group entitled *Of Plimouth Plantation*. The Scrooby church numbered at most about 100 members.

A Refuge in Holland

Under **Queen Elizabeth I** (r. 1558-1603) religious dissenters were harassed, imprisoned, deprived of property, driven into exile and sometimes executed. In 1592 Parliament passed the **Religion Act**, prohibiting Separatists from holding their own church services under penalty of fine, imprisonment, and even exile from England. By the end of her reign most of the Nonconformists were either meeting secretly or fleeing across the English Channel to Holland, generally regarded as the most tolerant country in Europe at the time. With the ascension of **King James I** (r. 1603-25) to the throne in 1603, the persecution of Nonconformists intensified. Late in 1607, about a hundred Separatists managed to slip out of England and emigrated to Holland. The congregation settled at Amsterdam and integrated with an existing congregation called the "Ancient Church." However, personal and theological arguments soon forced the Scrooby Separatists to relocate to Leiden, reputed to be the most tolerant city in Holland.

Leiden harbored thousands of Protestant refugees, along with Catholics and other minorities. Years later, William Bradford would describe the Separatist refugees as "pilgrims and strangers upon the earth"¹ They were soon joined by John Robinson and William Brewster, and eventually their community numbered several hundred. The Separatists lived in Leiden for 12 years, learning trades and enjoying friendly relations with their neighbors. According to one Dutch citizen in Leiden, "These English have lived among us now these 12 years and yet we never had any [law]suit or accusation come against any of them."

In 1615 Robinson enrolled at the University of Leiden as a theology student, and in a public debate he defended the Calvinist position against a popular Arminian professor. Robinson was also a prolific writer who wrote more than 60 essays including sophisticated theological essays such as "A Justification of Separation from the Church of England" (1610), "A Defence of the Doctrine Propounded by the Synod of Dort (1624), "Observations Divine and Morall" (1625), and "A Treatise on the Lawfulness of Hearing Ministers in the Church of England" (1624). He also published several pamphlets defending Separatist doctrines.

Eventually, the Separatists left Holland for several reasons. First, as foreigners, they never felt at home in Holland, and many found it difficult to obtain suitable employment. Second, they feared their children were being corrupted by permissive Dutch society, becoming disrespectful to parents and questioning their faith. Some children even left their family behind and became sailors or soldiers. As William Bradford later recounted, some were "drawne away by evill examples into extravagante &

¹ Reference Hebrews 11:13.

dangerous courses... & departing from their parents... so that they saw their posterietie would be in danger to degenerate & be corrupted.” Third, a twelve-year peace between Spain and the Netherlands ended in 1619, and there were rumors that the Spanish were preparing to invade the Low Countries and reimpose Catholicism on the Dutch. Also that year, a less tolerant Dutch regime came to power, and the Separatists feared that “great miseries might possibly befall them in this place.”

In desperation, the Separatists considered emigrating to America, but a major concern was hostile natives. William Bradford warned the group that the Indians were “cruel, barbarous, and most treacherous, furious in their rage, and merciless” in war. The Separatists were told that Indians “are not content only to kill, but delight to torment men in the most bloody manner” such as “flaying alive” or “cutting off the members and joints” one by one and broiling and eating them in front of their victims. Nonetheless, the more immediate threat came from the Spanish, whom Bradford described as being potentially “as cruel as the savages of America.”

Bradford later wrote that it was granted the dangers [of immigrating to America] were great, but not desperate, and the difficulties were many, but not invincible; for although there were many [dangers] likely, yet they were not certain. It might be that some of the things feared might never befall them.... “They lived here [in Holland] but as men in exile and in a poor condition; and as great miseries might possibly befall them in this place; for the twelve years of truce were now out, and there was nothing but beating of drums and preparing for war, the events whereof are always uncertain. The Spaniard might prove as cruel as the savages of America, and the famine and pestilence as sore here as there, and liberty less to look out for remedy.”² Feeling trapped in Holland, many Separatists prepared to leave and emigrate to America.³

An Arduous Voyage

Sir Edwin Sandys, a devout Puritan and a shareholder in the **Virginia Company**, devised a plan for the Separatists to emigrate to North America and settle in “the northern parts of Virginia.” In return, King James I would cease harassing the group. Eager to leave Europe behind, the Separatists contracted with **Thomas Weston**, a capitalist entrepreneur and Separatist sympathizer, to finance their pilgrimage to America. In return they would repay Weston and the other investors with shiploads of timber and beaver furs. Over the summer of 1620 the Separatists sold their houses and other goods to prepare for the journey to North America, and in September two ships were outfitted and set sail from Plymouth, England for northern Virginia.

Unfortunately, the *Speedwell*, a 30-foot-long boat, failed to live up to its name. Just a couple of days out to sea it began leaking and had to return to port. The *Mayflower* was a medium-sized commercial ship – 100 feet-long and well-built. Although 102 passengers boarded the ship, only 41 were actually members of Robinson’s congregation. The rest were various “strangers” from London and Southampton, including 14 indentured servants and artisans. The intended destination was the

² See William Bradford’s history, *Of Plimoth Plantation*. Also see Nathaniel Morton, William Bradford, Thomas Prince, and Edward Winslow, *New England’s Memorial* (Congregational Board of Publication, 1669), p. 262.

³ In fact, a year after the Separatists sailed for America, the Spanish invaded Holland.

Chesapeake Bay, and as they sailed out of sight of England the Separatists onboard reportedly waved goodbye and exclaimed, “Farewell, Babylon!”

The voyage lasted 66 days – nearly 10 weeks – and was so turbulent that the passengers were confined for most of the journey to the lower decks. Over-crowded and living in filth, the stench was virtually unbearable and many became sick. After an exhausting journey in which the *Mayflower* was blown off course, it finally landed in Cape Cod Bay on November 9, 1620. Many passengers were suffering from disease and malnutrition, winter was setting in, and their situation was desperate. Besides that, they were out of beer!

Years later, William Bradford recorded their hopes and fears upon landing in such a desolate and hostile wilderness in his chronicle, *Of Plimouth Plantation*, wherein he wrote:

Being thus arived in a good harbor and brought safe to land, they fell upon their knees & blessed ye [the] God of heaven, who had brought them over ye vast & furious ocean, and delivered them from all ye periles & miseries therof, againe to set their feete on ye firme and stable earth, their proper elemente... But hear I cannot but stay and make a pause, and stand half amased at this poore peoples presente condition; and so I thinke will the reader too, when he well considers ye same. Being thus passed ye vast ocean, and a sea of troubles before in their preparation (as may be remembered by yt [that] which wente before), they had now no friends to wellcome them, nor inns to entertaine or refresh their weatherbeaten bodys, no houses or much less townes to repaire too, to seeke for succoure

What could not sustaine them but ye spirite of God & his grace? May not & ought not the children of these fathers rightly say: ‘Our faithers were Englishmen which came over this great ocean, and were ready to perish in this willdernes; but they cried unto ye Lord, and he heard their voyce, and looked on their adversitie, &c. Let them therefore praise ye Lord, because he is good, & his mercies endure for ever.’⁴

A Tenuous Settlement

Like the Puritans who followed them several years later and established the Massachusetts Bay Colony, the Pilgrims’ main priority was to establish a Christian community – a covenant community that would be governed by Biblical laws and principles. Since they were far north of Chesapeake Bay, some members of the group argued that they were outside the jurisdiction of the Virginia Company. Therefore, led by elders John Carver, William Brewster, William Bradford and Edward Winslow, 41 adult men signed the **Mayflower Compact**. The Compact became the basis for a representative government based on the rule of law and the consent of the governed. Carver died within a year, whereupon Bradford served as governor for most of the next 40 years.

Finally disembarking on November 21, 1620, the colonists settled at Pawtuxet, a former Wampanoag village that had been wiped out by plague several years earlier. The fields were cleared and ready for planting, which the settlers interpreted as a sign that God had prepared the way for them.

⁴ Tragically, Bradford lost his wife just prior to the Pilgrims disembarking. As the ship weighed anchor in Plymouth harbor, she slipped overboard while on deck and her body was never recovered. Some have speculated that she might have succumbed to depression and committed suicide while others suspect that she could have slipped on the *Mayflower*’s icy deck and fallen overboard.

Furthermore, there were no natives in the immediate area. The colonists worked hard throughout the harsh winter, building several houses and hunting game, but by March of 1621 nearly half had died of exposure or malnutrition. Only 5 of the 18 wives survived, and 4 families were wiped out entirely. Of the 29 single men, only 10 survived the winter.

One day in March, an unexpected guest arrived: a Wampanoag native named **Samoset**. The first words out of his mouth, “Welcome, English!” startled the settlers. As the historian Alfred Crosby has written: “An Indian walked out of the woods and through the fields into Plymouth. He was Samoset, who spoke some English, having learned it from English fishermen on the coast of Maine. He asked for beer, and [the Pilgrims gave him] ‘strong water,’ along with biscuit, butter, cheese, pudding, and a piece of duck. It was he who told the Pilgrims the old Indian name for their village and explained what had happened to its original inhabitants.”⁵

A few days later Samoset returned with another native, **Squanto**. It was Squanto who probably saved the colony from abject extinction – William Bradford considered him “a special instrument sent of God for [our] good.” Like Samoset, Squanto spoke English. Six years earlier he had been kidnapped along with a few other natives by an English trader, Thomas Hunt, who sold him as a slave in Spain. Squanto was bought by a humane Spanish monk, who treated him charitably and introduced him to the Catholic faith. Squanto was then sold to an Englishman, John Slaney, who took pity on him and arranged transport for him on an English ship that was exploring North America. Finally, in 1619 he returned home to his native village of Pawtuxet in the company of an English explorer, Thomas Dermer. As Dermer later noted, “[We] passed along the coast where [we] found some ancient [Indian] plantations, not long since populous but now utterly void;.. When [we] arrived at my savage’s [i.e., Squanto’s] native country [we found] all dead.”⁶ Soon after arriving, Squanto took Dermer to the Wampanoag village where the chief [sachem], **Massasoit**, released a French captive to Dermer.⁷

Soon after Squanto’s visit, the Wampanoag sachem Massasoit arrived with 60 men. The natives assumed that the English had come to avenge the death of Dermer (see the footnote #7 below). Nonetheless, they came in peace, and although the meeting was tense, the two parties agreed to a pact. Over the succeeding months, Squanto showed the colonists where to fish and hunt and how to plant and harvest corn.

So why did the local natives tolerate these English intruders, and why did they not exterminate them immediately? Apparently, there were two reasons. At the time, the Wampanoags lived in fear of the

⁵ Alfred Crosby, “God Would Destroy Them and Give Their Country to Another People.” *American Heritage*.

⁶ Nathaniel Philbrick, *Mayflower: A Story of Courage, Community and War* (Penguin Books, 2007), pp. 52-53.

⁷ Dermer later left for Jamestown, where he spent the winter. When he returned the following summer, he found that the natives had an “inveterate malice” for the English. A few months earlier an English ship had arrived at Narragansett Bay and invited a large number of Massasoit’s tribesmen to join them aboard the vessel, whereupon they shot them down in cold blood. Dermer would have been killed by the Wampanoags had Squanto not intervened to save him, but a short time later he and his party were attacked at Martha’s Vineyard. Only Dermer and one other Englishman escaped the slaughter, but he soon died of his wounds after seeking shelter in Jamestown.

English god. (The Pilgrims later learned that Squanto warned the Wampanoags that the English could unleash a plague and destroy them whenever they wished.) Secondly, and as in Jamestown, the Wampanoags hoped to use the English as allies against rival tribes such as the Massachusetts and the Narragansetts. As the colonist Edward Winslow noted in his journal, Massasoit “hath a potent adversary, the Narragansetts, that are at war with him, against whom he thinks we may be some strength to him, for our [firearms] terrify them.”

A Happy Thanksgiving

When harvest-time came in the autumn of 1621 after a productive summer, the Pilgrims celebrated with a feast. As Edward Winslow later recounted:

We had a good increase of Indian corn and our Governor sent out 4 men fowling. In one day they brought back enough fowl to serve the entire company for one whole week. The pilgrims provided roast turkey, duck, geese, clams, eels, garden vegetables, fruits and nuts. We exercised our arms in recreation, and 90 Indians joined us along with their great king Massorat [Massasoit]. For 3 days we feasted and entertained each other. The Indians went out and killed 5 deer for us all. They have no religion or knowledge of God, yet are very trusty, quick of understanding, ripe witted and just. At the end of the feast, the Pilgrims prayed thanksgiving to God for (1) Thomas Hunt’s slave ship taking Squanto away from the plague that killed his entire tribe and for miraculously bringing him back and leading him to help them live. (2) For the terrible storm that blew them off course from the massacre of the Roanoke area and the disease of the Jamestown area. (3) Even for the merciful deaths of ½ the colonists that 1st winter, whose food rations saved the rest from starvation death. (4) Lastly for the bountiful harvest that summer of 1621 and the feast with the Indians.⁸

⁸ The Pilgrims didn’t refer to the harvest festival as a “Thanksgiving” feast – a term that was attributed to it later in American history. Also, this wasn’t actually the first Thanksgiving celebrated in America. Two years earlier the 38 English colonists who settled the **Berkeley Hundred** plantation in Virginia (about 20 miles upstream from Jamestown) set aside December 9, 1619 as a special day of Thanksgiving. In fact, the group’s London Company charter had specified “that the day of our ships arrival at the place assigned... in the land of Virginia shall be yearly and perpetually kept holy as a day of thanksgiving to Almighty God.”

Throughout the colonial era special days of prayer and thanksgiving were sometimes declared by royal governors or even local ministers, often during times of war and crisis. During the American Revolution the Continental Congress designated several “national days of prayer, humiliation, and thanksgiving,” and in December of 1777 General George Washington proclaimed a Thanksgiving victory celebration following the defeat of the British at the Battle of Saratoga. Twelve years later, after the ratification of the Constitution and the formation of the United States, President Washington issued a Thanksgiving proclamation at the behest of Congress. However, any official celebration of an annual Thanksgiving holiday was sporadic until 1863 when Abraham Lincoln proclaimed a national day of “Thanksgiving and Praise to our beneficent Father who dwelleth in the Heavens” to be celebrated on the last Thursday in November. Seven years later, in 1870, President Ulysses S. Grant signed into law the Holidays Act that made Thanksgiving an official annual federal holiday.

New Challenges

A few weeks later in December, a ship appeared on the horizon. At first, they feared that it might be a French reconnaissance vessel, but it turned out to be an English supply ship, *The Fortune*, sent by Thomas Weston. *The Fortune*, a tiny vessel only 30 feet long, brought 35 more settlers – but only a few were Separatists. Furthermore, the new arrivals were a mixed blessing as they added more mouths to feed!

By 1622 the local natives were losing their fear of the English and their god. Both the colonists and the Indians heard the news of the Jamestown massacre in which a third of the colonists were killed in a surprise attack by the Powhatans, and later that fall Squanto became sick and died. According to Bradford, Squanto “desir[ed] the Governor to pray for him, that he might go to the Englishmen’s God in heaven.” At this point, some native tribes conspired to wipe out the colonists. However, a “great sickness not unlike the plague” fell upon the natives, killing many. To complicate matters, Massasoit also fell ill. But after Edward Winslow nursed him back to health with some simple remedies, the Indians’ awe of the English god was restored. Once recovered, the grateful Massasoit revealed the plan to annihilate the colony.

In response, **Capt. Myles Standish** (c. 1584-1656) and a small group of men sailed to Boston Bay, where they apprehended and killed several of the alleged leaders in the plot. They returned home with the severed head of one of the conspirators, which they displayed at Plymouth as a warning to other tribes.⁹ The local natives never again attempted to strike at the colony.

Plymouth Society, Religion and Government

Although few in number, the Separatists of Plymouth were immensely influential in subsequent American history. In his monumental *Oxford History of the American People* (1965), the Harvard historian Samuel Eliot Morison called the Pilgrims “the spiritual ancestors of all Americans.” The Pilgrim church was governed democratically, but requirements for church membership were rigorous. For several years after settling in Plymouth the colonists waited in vain for the arrival of John Robinson and the rest of their congregation. In the meanwhile, William Brewster served as the lead elder and pastor for the group. But Robinson never came, and he died of illness early in 1625. Otherwise, a few more Separatists arrived between 1629-33, including Robinson’s son Isaac. Also among the new arrivals was a minister, Ralph Smith, who filled the position as the congregation’s pastor. (Many years later, in 1658, Professor John Hoornebeek of the University of Leiden claimed that Robinson’s wife Bridget and most of her children were still living in Leiden where they eventually joined the Dutch Reformed Church.)

Like nearly all Christians in the 17th century, the Separatists were ardent sacralists who believed that both the church and the state should work cooperatively to govern society and regulate its cultural institutions. Although they had fled religious persecution in England, once they established their own community in Plymouth the Pilgrims were as exclusivistic as most other Christians of their time. As the late-19th century Christian historian Williston Walker noted, “Neither Pilgrims nor Puritans had any thought of establishing liberty for men to do as they pleased; nor would any general toleration, such as we now justly value, have furnished motives definite enough to have led our ancestors to the New

⁹ Back in Holland, John Robinson wrote that he wished the Separatists had converted some Indians to Christianity “before you had killed any.”

World.”¹⁰ In that regard the Pilgrims in Plymouth Colony would have heartily endorsed a legal statute later drafted by the Puritans in Massachusetts Bay Colony that declared: “All familists [i.e., Christian perfectionists], Antinomians, Anabaptists and other Enthusiasts shall have free liberty to keepe away from us.” Stated succinctly, the Pilgrims, like the Puritans, came to America to *escape* error, not to *tolerate* it, in their New Jerusalem.

Plymouth’s civil government, formalized in the Mayflower Compact, was modeled on their congregational church polity. Originally, the signers of the Compact constituted a General Court, which elected the governor and his council. After the first year, however, with so many of the original signers having died, all male church members regardless of social standing were granted the right to vote and serve on the General Court. Years later, the voting franchise was extended to all male members of the colony, and the General Court became a representative assembly composed of members of the various towns in the vicinity.

Plymouth Socialism and Subsequent Growth

The leaders and most prominent members of Plymouth colony were professing Christians, and they were motivated by the noblest of virtues. Therefore, they resolved to be as selfless as possible and all work for the common good. Therefore, for its first 2-1/2 years the Plymouth economy was a communal system. There was no private property, nor was there any specified division of labor. Because provisions were so scarce, they agreed that the land would be worked in common, all produce would be owned in common, and everything would be distributed equally. The result – despite being a cooperative “Christian” community – was that the colony was grossly under-productive. Conflicts soon broke out over charges that some colonists were slackers, and there were reports that some had even begun to pilfer food and other goods from the storehouse.

As William Bradford later recalled in his history of Plymouth colony:

The experience that was had in this commone course and condition, tried sundrie years, and that amongst godly and sober men, may well evince the vanitie of that conceite of Plato & other ancients, applauded by some of later times; – that ye taking away of properties, and bringing it in communitie into a commone wealth, would make them happy and flourishing; as if they were wiser than God.

For this comunitie (so farr as it was) was found to breed much confusion & discontent, and retard much employment that would have been to their benefite and comforte. For yet young men that were most able and fitte for labor & services did repine that they should spend their time & strength to worke for other men’s wives and children without any recompense.

In 1623 the colony abandoned its original communal economy and mandated that each man was responsible to provide for his own self and that of his family. The results were striking. Men and women worked longer and harder, and those who had often shirked work



William Bradford statue
in Plymouth, MA

¹⁰ Williston Walker, *A History of the Congregational Churches* (1894), p. 99.

in the past suddenly became more industrious. More land was cultivated, more game was hunted and killed, and more houses and other buildings were constructed. Once the Pilgrims replaced socialism (i.e., communism) with individual responsibility, the general productivity and well-being of the colony increased dramatically. Therefore, the governing council no longer had to exert so much authoritarian control, and the community as a whole became happier. However, at this time the land was parceled out according to the size of each household “only for present use” as it was still community property and was not inheritable.

Finally, in 1625, the colony grew enough food to feed themselves and trade with the natives. Then the move toward private property came around 1627 when cattle were introduced into the colony and the land was divided up among families for the grazing of livestock. At some point around this time the land was deeded out as private property to the community’s residents, and slowly but surely the colony built up an economic base on subsistence farming, fur trading, fishing, and the raising of livestock.

However, the colony grew very slowly due to poor soil and the strict exclusivity of the Separatists. In 1630 there were still only about 300 inhabitants in Plymouth, but by 1643 there were 10 villages numbering about 2500 people. Plymouth Colony maintained its independence for about 70 years until it was finally incorporated into the greater Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1691.¹¹

Postscript: Plymouth and the Origins of America’s Culture War

American Christians have been the most free Christians in all of history. In general, we have also been the most privileged and prosperous. However, over the past several decades we have witnessed the most withering assault on Christian beliefs and values in our nation’s history by a powerful and insidious coalition of secular forces that have infiltrated, infested and taken control of most of our cultural institutions. Not only are basic Christian moral principles under constant attack, but religious liberty itself is threatened by this anti-Christ agenda. Whether we call it Cultural Marxism, Critical Theory, “Social Justice” or just Political Correctness, it is systematically destroying the moral and spiritual foundations of our nation. But many people today – including many Christians and church leaders – want to deny that there is a culture war raging in America.

For those who recognize the reality of the culture war, many assume that it began in the 1960s with the emergence of the sexual revolution, the New Left and the counterculture. Others with a more extended view of history might take it back to the explosion of hedonism that characterized the “Roaring Twenties” – or even to the late 19th century with the rise of Darwinism, Freudianism, and the secularization of American education. But in fact, the origin of America’s culture war extends back virtually to the very beginning, within a few years of the founding of Plymouth colony.

From the outset America was founded by colonists who were motivated by various factors. Some came for religious liberty. Some sought more political freedom. These were political dissidents who

¹¹ A note on William Bradford’s history, *Of Plimouth Plantation*: Written between 1630 and 1651, it traced the history of the Scrooby Separatists over the 40 years from 1608 to 1651. After having been passed down through several generations of descendants, the book disappeared around the beginning of the American Revolution. Quotes from the book appeared in Bishop Samuel Wilburforce’s 1844 manuscript, *A History of the Protestant Episcopal Church in America*. The book was eventually located in the library of the bishop of London in the 1850s and published in print in 1856. After prolonged negotiations, it was returned to Boston in 1897 and is housed in the Massachusetts State House.

believed in local self-government so as to avoid the tyranny of monarchs and their appointed officials. For many, the primary motivation was personal ambition – i.e., greater social and economic opportunities. But for a few others, their prime motivation was libertine hedonism – they wanted to live outside the bounds of normal social mores and constraints. When the first histories of America were written in the early 19th century, historians tended to emphasize the first three factors – the religious, the political, and the social/economic factors. Many 20th century historians, influenced by secular historicism and a Marxist analysis of history, tended to focus almost exclusively on the socio/economic factors. Virtually none gave the fifth factor – libertine hedonism – much consideration. However, this impulse was present from the beginning among some colonists.

In Plymouth colony, no sooner had the weary Separatists endured the bleak conditions of their first few years in North America than they encountered another challenge: A group of English immigrants led by **Thomas Morton** (1576-1647) settled a few miles up the coast at **Mount Wollaston** (later renamed **Merrymount**). Unlike the devout and sober Separatists, the Merrymounters had a different agenda. In philosophical terms, this became a battle between two contrasting worldviews. (1) The Puritan vision of a Christian commonwealth – “a city on a hill” – and (2) a vision of America as a secular utopia established by libertarian humanists with few laws and rules regulating their individual beliefs and personal behavior. While one vision conceived of the New World as an opportunity to build a New Jerusalem, the other sought to set up a New Babylon (or eventually, Las Vegas!). In retrospect, the confrontation that ensued between these two communities of settlers was in effect the first skirmish in America’s ongoing culture war.

In 1624 Morton led a party of 30 young men to settle in Massachusetts. Morton was a lawyer, a writer, a social reformer and a free spirit who personified the values and morals of pre-Puritan “Merrie Olde England.” Although born into a High Anglican family, he was drawn to the morally lax libertine culture of Elizabethan England while studying law in London. Through his social connections he became involved with Ferdinando Gorges, the governor of Plymouth (England), who was a sponsor of overseas colonization. In 1622 Morton accompanied an exploration expedition to the coast of New England where he visited the newly established Plymouth colony.

Although intrigued by the prospects of colonization, Morton dismissed the Separatists as insufferable self-righteous prigs. Returning home, he helped organize a colonial trading enterprise sponsored by Gorges and other investors with a vision for planting a colony based on liberal humanistic values, and over the next year he recruited 30 young men to join him in his venture as indentured servants. Morton and his party founded Mount Wollaston, just 20 miles north of Plymouth. Immediately, they began farming and trading for furs and other provisions on land given to them by the local Algonquin tribe. Morton admired the natives’ culture, their primitive animism,¹² and their uninhibited social customs – particularly their sexual mores. In fact, he considered the “savages” to be “more civilized and humanitarian” than his fellow Englishmen who lived down the coast at Plymouth. Although he was at best only a nominal “Christian,” Morton reportedly sought to convert the Algonquins to his liberal brand of Anglicanism.¹³

¹² Animism is the worship of nature, including the spirits that are thought to inhabit nature.

¹³ Virtually all Englishmen – like virtually all Europeans – identified themselves as “Christians” at this time in history.

From the outset there were tensions between the Mount Wollaston settlers and Plymouth. The Separatists considered Morton to be a virtual heathen, an impious drunkard, a hedonistic antinomian, and an irresponsible troublemaker who promoted immoral sexual relations between his young men and local Algonquin girls. Even more alarming were rumors that he was trading guns to the local natives, whom the Separatists regarded as potentially hostile. On the other hand, Morton was openly scornful of the Separatists for their exclusive religious beliefs and legalistic moral codes. He ridiculed and mocked their leaders such as the diminutive military commander, Myles Standish, whom Morton derisively referred to as “Captain Shrimp.” Relations between the communities grew all the more tense over the next couple of years as some young men began defecting from Plymouth to Mount Wollaston, drawn by the lax laws and libertine spirit that Morton promoted. Since the success (and even the survival) of both colonies depended upon a growing population, the fact that some young men were leaving Plymouth was troublesome even though the Separatists dismissed the defectors as “scum.”

In 1628 Morton further antagonized the Plymouth leaders by renaming his settlement “Ma-re-Mount” (“Merrymount”). Furthermore, he announced a special May Day celebration in which he organized a pagan Greek-style festival to reward his hardworking comrades. A shrewd promoter, he ordered the erection of an 80-foot Maypole and invited local natives to the celebration – including plenty of nubile young females.

In Plymouth, Governor William Bradford condemned the Maypole as a pagan idol and compared the Merrymount festivities to a Roman bacchanalia. He later noted in his memoirs, “They... set up a May-pole, drinking and dancing about it many days together, inviting Indian women for their consorts, dancing and frisking together... and worse practices.” Seeing their New Jerusalem threatened by this influx of Babylonians (or Canaanites), the Separatists took pre-emptive action. Captain Standish and a special ops force marched through the night, catching the unsuspecting Merrymounters by surprise, and chopped down the Maypole. They also managed to capture Thomas Morton, and binding him in chains, they brought him to Plymouth on charges of “supplying guns to the Indians.”¹⁴

Back in Plymouth, Bradford was reluctant to execute Morton because of his political connections in London. So, they put him in stocks, gave him a mock trial, and marooned him on a deserted island until a ship could carry him back to England. (According to Morton, he would have starved to death had some local natives not smuggled him some food.)

In 1629 thousands of Puritans began arriving in Massachusetts, and like the Separatists in Plymouth they were resolutely hostile to the Merrymount colonists. They referred to Merrymount as “Mount Dagon” (a reference to the evil Canaanite god), and in the winter of 1629 the Puritans raided the colony’s food supplies. By the following spring most of the colony’s inhabitants had scattered, and its buildings were destroyed a year or so after that.

Morton returned to Massachusetts in 1629 but was promptly arrested, tried and banished from the colony once again. Back in England, he waged a propaganda war against the Puritans and sued the Massachusetts Bay Company that sponsored their colonial venture. Portraying himself as an innocent victim of Puritan intolerance whose civil liberties had been unjustly violated, he skillfully exploited his connections in the court of **King Charles I** (r. 1625-49) and managed to have Parliament revoke the charter of the Massachusetts Bay Company in 1635.

¹⁴ Morton later claimed that he had surrendered peaceably to avoid bloodshed, but Bradford contended that the Merrymounters were simply too drunk to fight.

In 1637 he published *The New English Canaan* in which he provided his view on the erection of the Maypole at Merrymount and the culture war that it ignited. In his words:

The inhabitants of Merrymount... did devise amongst themselves to have... Revels, and merriment after the olde English custom... & therefore brewed barrells of excellent beer, & provided a case of bottles to be spent, with other good cheer, for all comers of that day. And upon Mayday they brought the Maypole to the place appointed, with drums, guns, pistols, and other fitting instruments, for that purpose; and there erected it with the help of Savages, that came thither of purpose to see the manner of our Revels. A goodly pine tree of 80 foot long, was reared up, and a pair of buckshorns [antlers] nailed to it....¹⁵

Several years later when the **English Civil War** erupted in 1642, Morton, a staunch Royalist, found himself on the losing side of the conflict. Once again, he crossed the Atlantic and sought refuge in New England. However, when he disembarked, he was promptly arrested as a Royalist “agitator,” charged with sedition and conspiracy regarding the revocation of the colony’s charter, and thrown into a dank dungeon for the winter. After suffering for several months in prison, his health broke and he was granted clemency. Cut off from supporters in England, Morton withered away and died a couple of years later in Maine.

The history of Mount Wollaston didn’t end with the burning of its buildings and the scattering of its inhabitants in the late 1620s. In fact, for the next 150 years the area around the former community continued to be associated with freethinkers and rebels. In 1636 the radical feminist Anne Hutchinson briefly settled there with her family after she was expelled from the Puritan commonwealth in Boston for holding antinomian and heretical views. In the mid-1600s the Mount Wollaston area was renamed Braintree and then later **Quincy**, and in the early 1700s the grandfather of **John Adams** bought the old Mount Wollaston farm. John inherited the farm and lived there most of his life. Also in the mid-1700s another notable American revolutionary, John Hancock, was born in Quincy. In 1837 the novelist **Nathaniel Hawthorne** wrote an imaginative story about the culture clash between the Pilgrims of Plymouth and the libertines of Merrymount entitled “**The May-Pole of Merry Mount**.” In keeping with the times, Hawthorne depicted Morton and his followers as merry revelers and innocent victims of Christian intolerance and self-righteousness¹⁶ – a view has become generally accepted as American society and culture have become increasingly secular.



¹⁵ *The New English Canaan*, Book III, Ch. 4

¹⁶ In 1934 the WPA erected a 1½-mile-long wall around the Mount Wollaston Cemetery dedicated to the memory of Thomas Morton, and in recent years Wiccans and other neo-pagans have periodically descended upon the area to celebrate the story of Merrymount in honor of America’s pagan heritage.

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