

The Truth about The First Thanksgiving

By James W. Loewen
Lies My Teacher Told Me

Over the last few years, I have asked hundreds of college students, "When was the country we now know as the United States first settled?"

That is a generous way of putting the question. Surely "we now know as" implies that the original settlement happened before the United States. I had hoped that students would suggest 30,000 BC, or some other pre-Columbian date. They did not. Their consensus answer was "1620."

Part of the problem is the word "settle." "Settlers" were white. Indians did not settle. Nor are students the only people misled by "settle." One recent Thanksgiving weekend, I listened as a guide at the Statue of Liberty told about European immigrants "populating a wild East Coast." As we shall see, however, if Indians had not already settled New England, Europeans would have had a much tougher job of it.

Starting with the Pilgrims not only leaves out the Indians, but also the Spanish. In the summer of 1526 five hundred Spaniards and one hundred black slaves founded a town near the mouth of the Pedee River in what is now South Carolina. Disease and disputes with nearby Indians caused many deaths. Finally, in November the slaves rebelled, killed some of their masters, and escaped to the Indians. By now only 150 Spaniards survived, and they evacuated back to Haiti. The ex-slaves remained behind. So the first non-Native settlers in "the country we now know as the United States" were Africans.

The Spanish continued their settling in 1565, when they massacred a settlement of French Protestants at St. Augustine, Florida, and replaced it with their own fort. Some Spanish were pilgrims, seeking regions new to them to secure religious liberty: these were Spanish Jews, who settled in New Mexico in the late 1500s. Few Americans know that one third of the United States, from San Francisco to Arkansas to Natchez to Florida, has been Spanish longer than it has been "American." Moreover, Spanish culture left an indelible impact on the West. The Spanish introduced horses, cattle, sheep, pigs, and the basic elements of cowboy culture, including its vocabulary: mustang, bronco, rodeo, lariat, and so on.

Beginning with 1620 also omits the Dutch, who were living in what is now Albany by 1614. Indeed, 1620 is not even the date of the first permanent British settlement, for in 1607, the London Company sent settlers to Jamestown, Virginia. No matter. The mythic origin of "the country we now know as the United States" is at Plymouth Rock, and the year is 1620. My students are not at fault. The myth is what their textbooks and their culture have offered them. I examined how twelve textbooks used in high school American history classes teach Thanksgiving. Here is the version in one high school history book, THE AMERICAN TRADITION:

After some exploring, the Pilgrims chose the land around Plymouth Harbor for their settlement. Unfortunately, they had arrived in December and were not prepared for the New England winter. However, they were aided by friendly Indians, who gave them food and showed them how to grow corn. When warm weather came, the colonists planted, fished, hunted, and prepared themselves for the next winter. After harvesting their first crop, they and their Indian friends celebrated the first Thanksgiving.

My students also learned that the Pilgrims were persecuted in England for their religion, so they moved to Holland. They sailed on the Mayflower to America and wrote the Mayflower Compact. Times were rough, until they met Squanto. He taught them how to put fish in each corn hill, so they had a bountiful harvest.

But when I ask them about the plague, they stare back at me. "What plague? The Black Plague?" No, that was three centuries earlier, I sigh.

"THE WONDERFUL PLAGUE AMONG THE SAVAGES"

The Black Plague does provide a useful introduction, however. Black (or bubonic) Plague "was undoubtedly the worst disaster that has ever befallen mankind." In three years it killed 30 percent of the population of Europe. Catastrophic as it was, the disease itself comprised only part of the horror. Thinking the day of judgment was imminent, farmers failed to plant crops. Many people gave themselves over to alcohol. Civil and economic disruption may have caused as much death as the disease itself.

For a variety of reasons --- their probable migration through cleansing Alaskan ice fields, better hygiene, no livestock or livestock-borne microbes --- Americans were in Howard Simpson's assessment "a remarkable healthy race" before Columbus. Ironically, their very health now proved their undoing, for they had built up no resistance, genetically or through childhood diseases, to the microbes Europeans and Africans now brought them. In 1617, just before the Pilgrims landed, the process started in southern New England. A plague struck that made the Black Death pale by comparison.

Today we think it was the bubonic plague, although pox and influenza are also candidates. British fishermen had been fishing off Massachusetts for decades before the Pilgrims landed. After filling their hulls with cod, they would set forth on land to get firewood and fresh water and perhaps capture a few Indians to sell into slavery in Europe. On one of these expeditions they probably transmitted the illness to the people they met. Whatever it was, within three years this plague wiped out between 90 percent and 96 percent of the inhabitants of southern New England. The Indian societies lay devastated. Only "the twentieth person is scarce left alive," wrote British eyewitness Robert Cushman, describing a death rate unknown in all previous human experience. Unable to cope with so many corpses, survivors fled to the next tribe, carrying the infestation with them, so that Indians died who had never seen a white person. Simpson tells what the Pilgrims saw:

The summer after the Pilgrims landed, they sent two envoys on a diplomatic mission to treat with Massasoit, a famous chief encamped some 40 miles away at what is now Warren, Rhode Island. The envoys discovered and described a scene of absolute havoc. Villages lay in ruins because there was no one to tend them. The ground was strewn with the skulls and the bones of thousands of Indians who had died and none was left to bury them.

During the next fifteen years, additional epidemics, most of which we know to have been smallpox, struck repeatedly. Europeans caught smallpox and the other maladies, to be sure, but most recovered, including, in a later century, the "heavily pockmarked George Washington." Indians usually died. Therefore, almost as profound as their effect on Indian demographics was the impact of the epidemics on the two cultures, European and Indian. The English Separatists, already seeing their lives as part of a divinely inspired morality play, inferred that they had God on their side. John Winthrop, Governor of Massachusetts Bay Colony, called the plague "miraculous." To a friend in England in 1634, he wrote:

But for the natives in these parts, God hath so pursued them, as for 300 miles space the greatest part of them are swept away by the small pox which still continues among them. So as God hath thereby cleared our title to this place, those who remain in these parts, being in all not fifty, have put themselves under our protect....

Many Indians likewise inferred that their God had abandoned them. Cushman, our British eyewitness, reported that "those that are left, have their courage much abated, and their countenance is dejected, and they seem as a people affrighted." After all, neither they nor the Pilgrims had access to the germ theory of disease. Indian healers offered no cure, their religion no explanation. That of the whites did. Like the Europeans three centuries before them, many Indians surrendered to alcohol or began to listen to Christianity.

These epidemics constituted perhaps the most important single geopolitical event of the first third of the 1600s, anywhere on the planet. They meant that the British would face no real Indian challenge for their first fifty years in America. Indeed, the plague helped cause the legendary warm reception Plymouth enjoyed in its first formative years from the Wampanoags. Massasoit needed to ally with the Pilgrims because the plague had so weakened his villages that he feared the Narragansetts to the west.

Moreover, the New England plagues exemplify a process which antedated the Pilgrims and endures to this

day. In 1492, more than 3,000,000 Indians lived on the island of Haiti. Forty years later, fewer than 300 remained. The earliest Portuguese found that Labrador teemed with hospitable Indians who could easily be enslaved. It teems no more. In about 1780, smallpox reduced the Mandan's of North Dakota from nine villages to two; then in 1837, a second smallpox epidemic reduced them from 1600 persons to just 31. The pestilence continues; a fourth of the Yanomamos of northern Brazil and southern Venezuela died in the year prior to my writing this sentence.

Europeans were never able to "settle" China, India, Indonesia, Japan, or most of Africa because too many people already lived there. Advantages in military and social technology would have enabled Europeans to dominate the Americas, as they eventually dominated China and Africa, but not to "settle" the New World. For that, the plague was required. Thus, except for the European (and African) invasion itself, the pestilence was surely the most important event in the history of America.

What do we learn of all this in the twelve histories I studied? Three offer some treatment of Indian disease as a factor in European colonization. LIFE AND LIBERTY does quite a good job. AMERICA PAST AND PRESENT supplies a fine analysis of the general impact of Indian disease in American history, though it leaves out the plague at Plymouth. THE AMERICAN WAY is the only text to draw the appropriate geopolitical inference about the importance of the Plymouth outbreak, but it never discusses Indian plagues anywhere else. Unfortunately, the remaining nine books offer almost nothing. Two totally omit the subject. Each of the other seven furnishes only a fragment of a paragraph that does not even make it into the index, let alone into students' minds.

Everyone knew all about the plague in colonial America. Even before the Mayflower sailed, King James of England gave thanks to "Almighty God in his great goodness and bounty towards us," for sending "this wonderful plague among the savages." Today it is no surprise that not one in a hundred of my college students has ever heard of the plague. Unless they read LIFE AND LIBERTY or PAST AND PRESENT, no student can come away from these books thinking of Indians as people who made an impact on North America, who lived here in considerable numbers, who settled, in short, and were then killed by disease or arms.

ERRAND INTO THE WILDERNESS

Instead of the plague, our schoolbooks present the story of the Pilgrims as a heroic myth. Referring to "the little party" in their "small, storm-battered English vessel," their story line follows Perry Miller's use of a Puritan sermon title, ERRAND INTO THE WILDERNESS. AMERICAN ADVENTURES even titles its chapter about British settlement in North America "Opening the Wilderness." The imagery is right out of Star Trek: "to go boldly where none dared go before."

The Pilgrims had intended to go to Virginia, where there already was a British settlement, according to the texts, but "violent storms blew their ship off course," according to some texts, or else an "error in navigation" caused them to end up hundreds of miles to the north. In fact, we are not sure where the Pilgrims planned to go. According to George Willison, Pilgrim leaders never intended to settle in Virginia. They had debated the relative merits of Guiana versus Massachusetts precisely because they wanted to be far from Anglican control in Virginia. They knew quite a bit about Massachusetts, from Cape Cod's fine fishing to that "wonderful plague." They brought with them maps drawn by Samuel Champlain when he toured the area in 1605 and a guidebook by John Smith, who had named it "New England" when he visited in 1614. One text, LAND OF PROMISE, follows Willison, pointing out that Pilgrims numbered only about thirty-five of the 102 settlers aboard the Mayflower. The rest were ordinary folk seeking their fortunes in the new Virginia colony. "The New England landing came as a rude surprise for the bedraggled and tired [non-Pilgrim] majority on board the Mayflower," says Promise. "Rumors of mutiny spread quickly." Promise then ties this unrest to the Mayflower Compact, giving its readers a uniquely fresh interpretation as to why the colonists adopted it.

Each text offers just one of three reasons---storm, pilot error, or managerial hijacking--to explain how the Pilgrims ended up in Massachusetts. Neither here nor in any other historical controversy after 1620 can any of the twelve bear to admit that it does not know the answer---that studying history is not just learning answers--that history contains debates. Thus each book shuts students out from the intellectual

excitement of the discipline.

Instead, textbooks parade ethnocentric assertions about the Pilgrims as a flawless unprecedented band laying the foundations of our democracy. John Garraty presents the Compact this way in 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." Such accounts deny students the opportunity to see the Pilgrims as anything other than pious stereotypes.

"IT WAS WITH GOD'S HELP...FOR HOW ELSE COULD WE HAVE DONE IT?"

Settlement proceeded, not with God's help but with the Indians'. The Pilgrims chose Plymouth because of its cleared fields, recently planted in corn, "and a brook of fresh water [that] flowed into the harbor," in the words of TRIUMPH OF THE AMERICAN NATION. It was a lovely site for a town. Indeed, until the plague, it had been a town. Everywhere in the hemisphere, Europeans pitched camp right in the middle of native populations---Cuzco, Mexico City, Natchez, Chicago. Throughout New England, colonists appropriated Indian cornfields, which explains why so many town names---Marshfield, Springfield, Deerfield--end in "field".

Inadvertent Indian assistance started on the Pilgrims' second full day in Massachusetts. A colonist's journal tells us:

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. ...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. A place "like a grave!"

More help came from a live Indian, Squanto. Here my students are on familiar turf, for they have all learned the Squanto legend. LAND OF PROMISE provides an archetypal account.

Squanto had learned their language, the author 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. As a boy, along with four Penobscots, he was probably stolen by a British captain in about 1605 and taken to England. There he probably spent nine years, two in the employ of a Plymouth merchant who later helped finance the Mayflower. At length, the merchant helped him arrange passage back to Massachusetts. He was to enjoy home life for less than a year, however. In 1614, a British slave raider seized him and two dozen fellow Indians and sold them into slavery in Malaga, Spain. Squanto escaped from slavery, escaped from Spain, made his way back to England, and in 1619 talked a ship captain 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 texts choose to ignore. For now Squanto walked to his home village, only to make the horrifying discovery that, in Simpson's words, "he was the sole member of his village still alive. All the others had perished in the epidemic two years before." No wonder he throws in his lot with the Pilgrims, who rename his village "Plymouth!" Now that is a story worth telling! Compare the pallid account in LAND OF PROMISE. "He had learned their language from English fishermen." What do we make of books that give us the unimportant details--Squanto's name, the occupation of his enslavers--while omitting not only his enslavement, but also the crucial fact of the plague? This is distortion on a grand scale.

William Bradford praised Squanto for many services, including his "bring[ing] them to unknown places for

their profit." "Their profit" was the primary reason most Mayflower colonists made the trip. It too came from the Indians, from the fur trade; Plymouth would never have paid for itself without it. Europeans had neither the skill nor the desire to "go boldly where none dared go before.]" They went to the Indians.

"TRUTH SHOULD BE HELD SACRED, AT WHATEVER COST"

Should we teach these truths about Thanksgiving? Or, like our textbooks, should we look the other way? Again quoting LAND OF PROMISE. "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)." Throughout the nation, elementary school children still enact Thanksgiving every fall as our national origin myth, complete with Pilgrim hats made of construction paper and Indian braves with feathers in their hair. An early Massachusetts colonist, Colonel Thomas Aspinwall, advises us not to settle for this whitewash of feel - good - history.

"It is painful to advert to these things. But our forefathers, though wise, pious, and sincere, were nevertheless, in respect to Christian charity, under a cloud; and, in history, truth should be held sacred, at whatever cost."

Thanksgiving is full of embarrassing facts. The Pilgrims did not introduce the Native Americans to the tradition; Eastern Indians had observed autumnal harvest celebrations for centuries. Our modern celebrations date back only to 1863; not until the 1890s did the Pilgrims get included in the tradition; no one even called them "Pilgrims" until the 1870s. Plymouth Rock achieved ichnographic status only in the nineteenth century, when some enterprising residents of the town moved it down to the water so its significance as the "holy soil" the Pilgrims first touched might seem more plausible. The Rock has become a shrine, the Mayflower Compact a sacred text, and our textbooks play the same function as the Anglican BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER, teaching us the rudiments of the civil religion of Thanksgiving.

Indians are marginalized in this civic ritual. Our archetypal image of the first Thanksgiving portrays the groaning boards in the woods, with the Pilgrims in their starched Sunday best and the almost naked Indian guests. Thanksgiving silliness reaches some sort of zenith in the handouts that school children have carried home for decades, with captions like, "They served pumpkins and turkeys and corn and squash. The Indians had never seen such a feast!" When his son brought home this "information" from his New Hampshire elementary school, Native American novelist Michael Dorris pointed out "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."

I do not read Aspinwall as suggesting a "bash the Pilgrims" interpretation, emphasizing only the bad parts. I have emphasized untoward details 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, like the Indians, they suffered from diseases. Half of them died. The Pilgrims did not cause the plague and were as baffled as to its true origin as the stricken Indian villagers. Pilgrim-Indian relations began reasonably positively. Thus the antidote to feel-good history is not feel-bad history, but honest and inclusive history. "Knowing the truth about Thanksgiving, both its proud and its shameful motivations and history, might well benefit contemporary children," suggests Dorris. "But the glib retelling of an ethnocentric and self-serving falsehood does no one any good." Because Thanksgiving has roots in both Anglo and Native cultures, and because of the interracial cooperation the first celebration enshrines, Thanksgiving might yet develop into a holiday that promotes tolerance and understanding. Its emphasis on Native foods provides a teachable moment, for natives of the Americas first developed half of the world's food crops. Texts could tell this--only three even mention Indian foods--and could also relate other contributions from Indian societies, from sports to political ideas. The original Thanksgiving itself provides an interesting example: the Natives and newcomers spent the better part of three days showing each other their various recreations.

Origin myths do not come cheaply. To glorify the Pilgrims is dangerous. The genial omissions and false details our texts use to retail the Pilgrim legend promote Anglocentrism, which only handicaps us when dealing with all those whose culture is not Anglo. Surely, in history, "truth should be held sacred, at whatever cost."