**Pilgrims and the Roots of the American Thanksgiving**

**English settlers of the 17th century were a diverse lot, and they became Americans despite themselves**

Colonial character was driven by a creative tension between lofty ideals and mundane desires. Illustration of ‘The First Thanksgiving 1621,’ after a painting by J.L.G. Ferris. *GraphicaArtis/Corbis*

By

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In the fall of 1621, 50 English men and women and 90 Native Americans gathered at New Plymouth in Massachusetts. The colonists had arrived a year earlier on a leaky wine ship, the Mayflower, and built a hillside settlement overlooking the ocean, little more than a few wooden huts in a stockade. The first winter had been terrible: Half their number had perished from malnutrition and disease. They had struggled to farm the land, were poorly supplied from England and relied on their Indian hosts for expertise and food.

But in the end, they did it. According to Edward Winslow, who had buried his wife that March, “Our harvest being gotten in, our governor sent four men on fowling so that we might after a special manner rejoice together after we had gathered the fruits of our labor.” The Pilgrims, as they would later be known, celebrated for three days—an event immortalized in American history as the first Thanksgiving.

The story has been heavily mythologized, and the numerous depictions of it that have come down to us are mostly patriotic romances, full of errors about the dress, technology and general atmosphere of the day. What we most tend to overlook in the Thanksgiving tale, however, is the wider context of settlement. English colonists—350,000 of them in the 17th century—were a diverse lot, and more English than you might imagine. Having left the Old World for the New, they clung to their old identities and tried to preserve them. In this, they failed, and yet from that failure, a new national character was born—the primary traits of which are still visible in Americans today.

The first colonists actually arrived more than a decade before the Mayflower, establishing themselves on the steamy river plantations of Virginia and the rocky coasts of Maine. The northern colony failed within a year. The Virginia settlements fared better, and thousands of young, mostly male apprentices poured into the tobacco fields to toil alongside growing numbers of enslaved Africans. A similar pattern developed in the other Chesapeake colony, Maryland. In the 1630s, successive waves of Puritan ships reached Massachusetts, their passengers settling in Boston and its satellite communities.

After this great migration came the “great reshuffle.” Settlers relocated to Rhode Island, New Hampshire and the lush plains of the Connecticut Valley, which in turn attracted newcomers from England. Meanwhile, the French settled in Canada and the Dutch in present-day New York. By 1660, there were 58,000 colonists in New England and the Chesapeake, compared with 3,000 in New France and 5,000 in Dutch New Netherland. Most English migrants—190,000 of them—went to the West Indies, where slave-owning planters specialized in sugar production and sustained New England by importing its food crops.

Virginia began life in 1607, at a quasi-military outpost called Jamestown. Captain John Smith, its leader and savior, described “pleasant plain hills and fertile valleys, one prettily crossing another…a plain wilderness as God first made it.” But this was no Eden. Appalling conditions—hostile natives, polluted water and rampant disease—were made worse by infighting and political chaos.

Unable to grow enough food, the colonists faced starvation by the winter of 1609. They ate vermin and leather—even the starch from their collars. “Nothing was spared to maintain life,” recalled George Percy, “and to do those things which seem incredible, as to dig up dead corpses out of graves and to eat them.” Nine out of 10 died, and the survivors and their often clueless replacements still had to find exports like timber, furs and pitch to pay their way. In the end, a farmer named John Rolfe cracked the problem with a new strain of sweet tobacco. A year later, there were wooden vending machines for tobacco in London alehouses. Virginia was in business.

Colonists always needed more land, but they had to tread carefully. Rolfe married an Indian princess named Pocahontas, which delighted the Virginia Company. The union meant ethnic peace in America and made for good propaganda at home. Renamed Rebecca Rolfe, she was received at the royal court in London, where, Smith noted, those clamoring to meet her “had seen many English ladies worse favored, proportioned and behaviored.”

Pocahontas’s death as she prepared to return home, probably from tuberculosis, destabilized relations with her people, and a dark cloud passed over Virginia. In 1622, a native uprising killed 347 colonists—a third of all English people in America. Even those who had come over to spread the gospel hardened their hearts. Now the English would take what they wanted. “Our hands, which before were tied with gentleness and fair usage,” remarked the Virginia Company secretary, “are now set at liberty.”

A year later, Virginia was still in a bad way. A youth named Richard Frethorne begged his parents to bring him home. “You would be grieved if you did know as much as I do,” he sobbed, “when people cry out day and night—Oh! That they were in England.” A few months later, he was dead.

*Robert Neubecker*

By this time, 600 miles to the north, Plymouth had been established. Prospective adventurers had learned from colonists there, and from the disasters at Jamestown, the importance of building colonies on firm foundations of family, authority, law, trade and a division of labor. Jamestown had underestimated the importance of women, whose work was invaluable and who allowed a colony to grow. So when the Puritan John Winthrop assembled his first fleet to sail to Massachusetts in 1630, the emphasis was on relocating households, even whole communities.

The first passenger ashore at Boston was a 9-year-old girl, who later remembered a land “very uneven, abounding in small hollows and swamps, and covered with blueberry and other bushes.” The migrants, ravaged by scurvy, were forced to shelter in burrows that they dug into the riverbank, where they ate fish and dried peas. From that modest start, however, they not only survived but thrived.

Gradually, across the eastern seaboard, colonies assumed their own forms and flavors. Massachusetts was repressive and, to England, seemed disloyal. Connecticut was tolerant, Rhode Island even more so. Maryland welcomed Catholics, which scandalized the ultra-Protestant Puritans. Maine seemed godless and ungoverned: One report alleged that Kennebec fishermen believed that “as many men may share in a woman as they do in a boat.”

There was variety even among the 102 passengers of the Mayflower, half of whom were “strangers” of dubious piety and morality. The Pilgrims were united by the religious community that they had formed in Leiden, Holland. The rest, who came from all over England, had little in common. Regional identities were strong, and there was little love lost between East Anglians and West Countrymen. And that was just one ship.

Life in the early colonies was unbelievably hard. Most colonies failed, and even in the promising ones, thousands of settlers died. Of the 10,000 people transported to Virginia after 1607, only a fifth were still alive in 1622. Many, in remote plantations dotted along the eastern seaboard, simply disappeared. Communications were poor and loneliness endemic. Wolves were a persistent menace, although colonists learned to kill them with fishhooks wrapped in fat.

Even when food was plentiful, it was monotonous: Settlers mostly ate cornbread and vegetable stew. Imported beer soured, and domestic brews were impossible without malt. At first, there were no shops, and Winthrop’s migrants were advised to take everything with them, including window glass.

New England’s soil was stony and hard to plow; crops were ruined by floods and droughts and caterpillars. The ice and snow exceeded anything experienced in England. There were few doctors, and remedies ranged from the bizarre to the dangerous. A Maine man who sucked an infection from his wife’s breast lost his teeth from the arsenic that had been previously applied.

The greatest trial was conflict with Native Americans. In the 1670s, New England was almost wiped off the map by what was, in proportion, the most devastating war in American history. Townships were overrun, their inhabitants killed or spirited away. Twelve settlements were destroyed, and 2,000 colonists died, including one-in-10 able-bodied men.

In February 1676, Thomas Eames, a farmer at Framingham, itemized his losses: a house, a barn, grain, tools and, at the top of the list, “a wife and nine children.” That same month, Mary Rowlandson, a minister’s wife at Lancaster, Mass., was seized during an Indian raid and endured three months of privation in freezing conditions. She ate “filthy trash” with her captors, whom she called “barbarous creatures.” Such terrifying experiences make it hard to understand why anyone stayed in America.

But then why had anyone come in the first place? Their reasons were manifold. The Pilgrims wanted to worship freely outside the Church of England. Others wanted to reform English religion. Most Virginians simply wanted to find land where they could make a living.

All of the colonists were trying to recreate a better version of the Old World rather than inventing something new. In society and economy, politics and religion, England was changing, many felt for the worse, and nostalgia for a golden age of faith—based on scripture, healthy social relations and charity among neighbors—was a powerful incentive to emigrate.

Winthrop’s “city upon a hill” speech, beloved of modern presidential speechwriters, was more of a reactionary manifesto than a radical one. It spoke of values that had decayed in English life to be resurrected across the Atlantic. This was revolution 17th-century style: a return to the status quo ante.

So the colonists set about building English houses, mixing arable farmland with pasture, approximating English meals and wearing their warm woolens, regardless of the weather. They behaved, so far as possible, as if nothing had changed. They imposed familiar hierarchies, enforced English laws and appointed magistrates and constables.

Wherever they went, they anglicized Indian place-names. Dozens of English towns and villages—Dorchester, Ipswich, Springfield—were reborn in America: Boston had been, and still is, a small Lincolnshire port. Long Island became “Yorkshire,” split into three parts or “ridings,” just like the English county.

America was the child, conceived and raised in the image of the parent—an extension of England, not its replacement. Writing in 1697, John Higginson, a minister at Salem, Mass., desired only “that the Little Daughter of New England in America may bow down herself to her Mother England.”

In the end, however, pretending to be in England, like turning expectantly to a lost golden age, was futile. Many succumbed to homesickness. One woman faked an inheritance that, she said, had to be collected in person, just so that her husband would let her go home. Some returned for good—one in five New Englanders by 1640.

Nor were the English alone in America. The varied character of their colonies was due not just to the pressures of landscape and ecology but to tense relations with Native Americans and European neighbors.

Failing to retain a recognizably English identity caused anxiety and disappointment. But from failure emerged something truly striking, a spirit that resonates in America across the centuries. Colonial character was driven by a creative tension between lofty ideals and mundane desires. Trying to remain the same, it turned out, demanded a constant effort of industry and reinvention.

The liberties that many migrants felt were being abused at home, by royal contempt for the rights of freeborn Englishmen, ended up being defended in America through the bondage of others—both indentured servants and slaves—and the disinheritance and dispersal of Native Americans. And for all their inward-looking community spirit, the fortunes of many New England communities depended on their expansion. The Puritan idea of a “sufficiency”—having just enough land to be comfortable—was compromised by commercial greed and voracious land grabs.

American religion also evolved in a surprising way. In Philadelphia—“the city of brotherly love”—and other economic centers, Christian virtues were extolled in an expanding world of litigiousness and competition. The secularism in civil government propagated in Rhode Island has its legacy today in the constitutional separation of church and state, but this coexists with an intense religiosity in politics that the Pilgrim fathers would have recognized and admired.

Still, for all their diversity and contradictions, English migrants to America tended to conform to a single recognizable type: the intrepid, resilient, undaunted pioneer. In every colony, similar challenges were met with the same determination and optimism.

Here we might return to Plymouth in 1621 and to the true story of the first Thanksgiving, which is richer and more edifying than the familiar holiday version. When the Pilgrim William Bradford said, “They began now to gather in the small harvest they had…being all well recovered in health and strength and had all things in good plenty,” he was bearing witness to the fact that, in their first crucial year, they had barely survived.

The Pilgrims were not typical settlers in the new land, but they still exemplify the extraordinary imagination and belief, fortitude and courage, shown by colonists across early America—qualities shared today by all manner of Americans, regardless of their ancestry.

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