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## Unlimited Opportunity in the New World

Nearly 400 years ago, a small group of European colonists landed in Cape Cod, Massachusetts, after a long and dangerous journey across the Atlantic. The pilgrims arrived aboard the Mayflower in November 1620, and signed the Mayflower Compact, agreeing they would stay together as a “civil body politic.” Finding Cape Cod undesirable for farming, a few weeks later they sailed to nearby Plymouth, where they made their home.

Of the 102 pilgrims aboard the Mayflower, only half were alive by the spring of 1621. Despite the brutal winter, none of the remaining colonists returned when the Mayflower set sail back to England. In what was a remarkable act of faith, they resolved to make this new land their home. That spring they also met the Wampanoag Indians, who befriended the pilgrims and taught them how to live off the land and survive the winter.

In the autumn, they shared a feast celebrating their successful harvest, which is generally acknowledged as the first Thanksgiving celebration. This celebration wasn’t repeated, however, and the pilgrims did not call it a day of thanksgiving. To them, a day of thanksgiving was considered a religious holiday where they would spend the day in worship and thank God for a specific event—this wasn’t to occur until 1623, when a day of fasting and prayer was called during a period of drought. When it began to rain during the prayers, it was declared a day of thanksgiving. Gradually, it became a custom to celebrate a day of thanksgiving after each harvest.

We know the celebration of Thanksgiving was directly connected with the harvest and the colonists’ success in farming their new land. Perhaps less well-known is that one of the best lessons they learned after a series of poor harvests was to abandon their original system of communal agriculture—which forced the industrious to provide for the not-so-industrious, without seeing any benefits to their added labor.

William Bradford, the long-time governor of Plymouth, soon realized the disaster that this backwards incentive threatened to bring to the colony and decided to allot a parcel of land to every family – letting them keep all they could produce. Many historians consider it his greatest achievement and it is believed that as soon as the pilgrims began individualized farming, they produced more food. Bradford wrote in his journal:

*This had very good success, for it made all hands very industrious, so as much more corn was planted than otherwise would have been by any means the Governor or any other could use, and saved him a great deal of trouble, and gave far better content (“Of Plymouth Plantation,” 1623).*

This choice the pilgrims made in 1623 helped lay the foundation for a new nation, one built in the spirit of unlimited opportunity and the idea that hard work *does* pay off. It is respect for this principle – that prosperity comes from allowing people to use their own talents and ingenuity to provide for themselves - that has helped make America what it is today.

If you have any comments or questions about this week's column or any other matter involving state government, please do not hesitate to contact me. You can reach my office by e-mail at [matt\\_bartle@senate.mo.gov](mailto:matt_bartle@senate.mo.gov) or by phone at (888) 711-9278. My web address is <http://www.senate.mo.gov/bartle>.

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